"Religion and the Commonweal in the Tradition of Political Philosophy": An Unpublished Lecture by Leo Strauss

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ABSTRACT

The transcript published here for the first time is of Leo Strauss's 1963 lecture on, and discussion of, the relation of religion to the commonweal in the tradition of political philosophy. In this lecture, Strauss considers the question of the establishment of religion, the relation of freedom of religion to freedom from religion, and the question of the truth of religion. The lecture has implications for American constitutional jurisprudence, especially concerning the First Amendment, which Strauss situates within the development of modern political philosophy.

EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there has been a considerable increase of interest in the thought and writings of Leo Strauss (1899–1973), and he has been gradually recognized as one of the most prominent political philosophers of the twentieth century. This renewed interest has led to the discovery and publication of writings and lectures that heretofore have been available only to few scholars. The

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following transcript is of particular importance in this regard because it deals with a question at the intersection of political philosophy and constitutional law (as well as extralegal considerations of political sociology) by clearly referring to the American context and debates around the proper understanding of the relationship between religion and politics in the US Constitution. As Strauss's treatment of this subject is intimately connected with the philosophical foundations of his thought, it is worthwhile to begin with an overview of this question in his thought.

One of the difficulties that the readers of Strauss often encounter is how to find their way through Strauss's writings as a whole. In view of the great diversity of his intellectual production—writings that mainly consist of commentaries on authors as different as Xenophon and Edmund Burke, Thucydides and Alfarabi, Maimonides and John Locke, Judah Halevi and Machiavelli—one receives the impression that Strauss's writings are so diverse that they resist any kind of categorization under a single heading. Although such impressions, which are born out of a look at the "surface" of Strauss's writings, certainly tell us something important about the character of his thought, Strauss himself once famously spoke of perhaps not the internal unity of his writings and intellectual project as a whole but at least the most important theme guiding his intellectual odyssey: in the 1964 preface to the German edition of *The Political Philosophy of Thomas Hobbes*, Strauss claims that throughout the years "the theologico-political problem has . . . remained *the* central theme" of his intellectual output, the problem that most clearly gives a certain unity to the plurality of his writings (Strauss 1979, 1; Meier 2006, 3–29). At its most fundamental level, the theologico-political problem is the awareness about the conflictual relationship of philosophy, revelation, and politics. Strauss was adamant in his writings that a harmonious synthesis of philosophy and revelation is not possible, although many, most famously Thomists, claim otherwise (Strauss 1953, 74–75; 2006, 150). He also argued that there is a fundamental conflict at the heart of the relationship between philosophy and politics, or more concretely, between the philosopher and the city as it is famously reflected in the execution of Socrates by the city of Athens (Strauss 1959b, 221–22; 1964, 21–23; 2000, 205–6). This preoccupation and the central importance of the theologico-political problem for Strauss are clearly seen in the transcript of the following lecture, where Strauss points to the question of "how one can secure by human means the future of religion without infringing on the rights of man." Reason, the instrument of philosophy and the highest human faculty, is put in charge of the future of what is issued out of the highest nonhuman source of knowledge, namely, revelation, and that in a political context.

It would be a mistake to believe, however, that Strauss's statement about the importance of the theologico-political problem is of much help in clarifying the

basic aspects of his thought to the common reader. In fact, the common reader and the more initiated are in the same boat in this regard. There are no straightforward answers regarding what the exact contours of Strauss's theologico-political problem actually are, in what sense it is the main axis of his writings, and even what is Strauss's position on this problem.[1] One of the main reasons for this lack of consensus and perplexity among the readers of Strauss is pointed to, in a rather subdued manner (which also means in a classic Straussian manner), by the peculiar opening of this lecture—the passage that we should discuss before we take a summary tour of the major themes of this lecture. Strauss begins his talk by explaining "how" he intends to approach the question of the relationship between politics and religion. This "how" turns out to be intimately connected with the problem of "unpleasant truths." What these unpleasant truths have to do with the problem of politics and religion is not clarified by the examples of the Yalta Conference or trade unions to which Strauss refers. What Strauss is pointing to is instead made clear by what he omits: when he quotes a passage from Voltaire, he omits the first sentence, which he quotes elsewhere: "The lot of an honest [or courageous] man is to explain his thoughts freely."

The passage from Voltaire opens the way for the introduction of the theologico-political problem. One must, however, bear in mind that in the body of his lecture Strauss decides to concentrate exclusively on only one, perhaps not the most fundamental, aspect of this problem, namely, the political side of the issue or the conflict between politics and religion. The more fundamental aspect of the issue, namely, the conflict of reason and revelation, is only implied by Strauss's constant reference to the "theoretical question" that must be resolved before addressing the practical issue; what is at the core of the theoretical issue only comes to the fore in the Q&A of the lecture by some of the participants who seem to know about this aspect of Strauss's thought. The audience inquires about the proper political attitude of a philosopher who as such denies the cognitive value of any knowledge that is not obtained through what is available to man as man, but who at the same time is aware that as a human being he has "some governing responsibility to the community."

The practical side of the theologico-political problem is reflected in the "two poles of human life," "religion" and "politics." Religion is here interpreted as "every human concern with a personal god," while politics is explained by reference to "the tradition of political philosophy." The word "tradition," with the connotation of something ossified and stagnate instead of living and

1. For a review of the debate among the readers of Strauss on the theologico-political problem, see Zuckert and Zuckert (2014, 313–27).

relevant, already points toward the precarious situation of "political philosophy" in Strauss's time, the forgetfulness that Strauss perhaps more than anyone else tried to remedy by giving a new life to the floundering discipline (Strauss 1953, 92; 1959c, 78–79; 1959d, 27; 1964, 2, 9; Meier 2006, 11–13). It is therefore natural that Strauss begins with Aristotle and Plato as *the* representatives of the tradition, its two towering figures who agree on the major issue: that the political order is in need of a public religion because laws need a superhuman support. This observation has led, Strauss claims, "all classical philosophers" to agree that "religion as civil religion" is the prerequisite of every well-ordered political order (Strauss 1952a, 130). Civil religion is religion seen from the point of view of political expediency. When the concern with the divine is treated exclusively through the lens of political considerations, as distinguished from the philosophical point of view proper, it is of a lower status. The idea of civil religion also suggests the necessary intervention of philosophers in the formation of religious beliefs. Strauss remarks that none of these classical philosophers claimed that they could found a religion, which is exclusively the purview of "the founders or legislators" (cf. Strauss 1959a, 154; 2006, 167, with Strauss 1952a, 124); the philosopher finds the religious tradition of his society and "has to accept it." But in view of the fact that "religion also creates certain dangers to the city," the philosopher's public responsibility requires that he "should affect or modify religion" when the good of the city requires it.

Strauss remarks that although "a fairly liberal religious practice" in what concerns religious belief was the general tendency in some societies of premodern times, there was no "legal protection" for religious heterodoxy, and nothing corresponding to the "First Amendment" existed before modern times: even philosophers did not demand such a protection, though "Socrates could have lived and died without any difficulty" in a city that demands belief only in cosmic or demonstrable gods. In this regard "classical antiquity was radically illiberal, philosophic or nonphilosophic," though somewhat more liberal in practice than in its explicit political recommendations.

The situation began to change in modern times and in the period immediately before the rise of modern consciousness properly speaking. Strauss is, however, careful to distance himself from the camp of those who argue for the decisive importance of Christianity in effecting this change of attitude and implicitly questions the so-called "secularization thesis" (see Strauss 1953, 60n22, 317; Manent 1987). The religious view proper, what Strauss identifies by the term "political theology," does not promote religious freedom, let alone freedom from religion. The most "the three universal monotheistic religions" permitted was some limited form of religious toleration with "great disability" in the case of the adherents of other recognized religions. The advent of the fundamental change was effected only through a fundamental break with

the orthodox view. This change, Strauss explains, did not happen overnight, but only gradually and through several steps. To begin with, the early modern philosophers still required some form of civil religion, although in the case of Thomas More and Niccolò Machiavelli, Strauss observes small but significant developments: More proposed a civil religion that allowed for some limited flexibility in what concerns the articles of faith and public cult, as well as the possibility of rational criticism of the established religion on the assumption that those critical views are only raised in private and in the presence of high-ranking citizens.[2] Machiavelli continued the classical tradition while making a significant exception in the case of absolute monarchies, which he believed can do away with the requirement of an established civil religion. The decisive break with the classical view comes with Thomas Hobbes (Machiavelli's "successor"; Strauss 1952b, xiii; 1953, 177–80) and Pierre Bayle, who denied the necessity of a civil religion and, for the first time, imagined the possibility and desirability of an atheistic society: "a society in which no public governmental act and no publicly supported act has any reference whatsoever to god . . . or in which no man suffers from any politically relevant disability . . . on the ground of his professed atheism" (Strauss 1953, 198–99, 198n43). Strauss describes this new development as "subterraneous," a new idea that "did not in any way affect public policy or public discussions until the nineteenth century," when the program of an atheistic political order became a political project especially through socialism and communism. The dominant view during the period from Hobbes to the nineteenth century remained a plea for a general toleration of different religious denominations with some notable exceptions. The idea of a universal toleration of all religious beliefs and practices, including the toleration of atheists, let alone the practical foundation of a fundamentally atheistic political order, was excluded from thought and practice during this period. This remark of Strauss is of the utmost importance for understanding Strauss's view of the American regime and its founding documents, which he describes as "a product of the eighteenth century." It seems that Strauss believes that the American regime is more in line with the transitional period, which still only embraced a limited toleration.

That Strauss is aware of the major preoccupation of his audience, and that the theologico-political problem is seen here primarily from the perspective of the American political regime, comes out clearly at the end of his lecture, as well as in the Q&A period. But this awareness is also present in an allusion where Strauss emphasizes the issue of prayer in More's utopian political order and surmises that the audience is perhaps "reminded of many contemporary

2. See the discussion of Plato's "law of laws" in Strauss (1975, 10–11).

facts by that."[3] It is from this specific context that Strauss guides his audience toward a reflection on the place of religion in a well-ordered political regime and invites us to "detachedly and soberly" reflect on how the establishment of public religion or lack thereof would "affect human beings, and all kinds of human beings." He warns us that even the philosophical conviction that "no religion is *true*" does not permit us to easily go along with the common notion among the intellectuals that the disappearance of religion would simply be a "relief for the world." Nor can we remain satisfied with the point of view of those who dilute the truly essential character of religion ("I am a religious man, [inasmuch as] I am a scientist!"), thereby circumventing the implications of revealed religion for human life. It is of the utmost importance, Strauss claims, to reflect on the teaching of those philosophers who seem to have categorically denied the possibility of an atheistic society being a "good society," or the position of others who have held that "an irreligious absolute monarchy, despotism, may be possible, an irreligious *republic* is not." Perhaps a good free society needs religion, but then what should be done with the teaching of the same philosophers who denied the possibility of a true religion? Are we inevitably condemned to choose between despotic "atheism or a living faith in a beast like Moloch?" (Strauss 1968, 264).

EDITORIAL NOTE

During his life, Strauss spoke on numerous occasions at the Hillel House on diverse topics. We know of at least five different texts that have survived from these lectures: "Progress or Return?," delivered in three sessions on November 5, 12, and 19, 1952; "Freud on Moses and Monotheism," which seems to have been delivered in the spring quarter (March–June) of 1958; "Introduction to Maimonides' *The Guide of the Perplexed*," delivered in two sessions on February 7 and 14, 1960; "Why We Remain Jews," delivered on February 4, 1962; and the current lecture, which was delivered on January 27, 1963 (Strauss 1997a, 1997b, 1997c, 2013). In addition, also at Hillel House Strauss delivered introductions to lectures by Martin Buber (December 3, 1951), Alexander Altmann (at some point in 1957), and Ernst Simon. In a footnote to one of his publications (Anastaplo 1975, 23n22), George Anastaplo remarks that a

3. Strauss seems to be referring to the US Supreme Court ruling in *Engel v. Vitale*, which took place on June 25, 1962, when, in a 6–1 decision, the Supreme Court held that voluntary prayer in public schools was unconstitutional, violating the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment. Strauss's lecture on January 27, 1963, was delivered seven months after this landmark decision, reiterating the 1947 *Everson v. Board of Education*, which applied the Establishment Clause in the country's Bill of Rights to state law. We are very grateful to an anonymous reviewer of *American Political Thought* who drew our attention to this point.

part of his study is adapted from a talk that he "delivered on March 3, 1963, at the Hillel Foundation Jewish Student Center, The University of Chicago," and which was "the last of a series, on *Religion and the Commonweal*, dedicated to the memory of Rabbi Maurice B. Pekarsky (1905–1962)." Anastaplo adds that "the series was inaugurated with a lecture by Leo Strauss, *The Tradition of Political Philosophy*." On the basis of this evidence and several passages in the lecture itself, we have concluded that the correct title of the lecture is "The Tradition of Political Philosophy," in its relationship with the question of religion and the commonweal.

This typescript is based on the audio file of the lecture, which is available on the Leo Strauss Center website. In our transcript, book titles are standardized, a few grammatical errors are corrected, the lecture is slightly edited for smoothness, and footnotes are used to provide relevant information and to identify Strauss's references. All errors are the responsibility of the editors.

RELIGION AND THE COMMONWEAL LECTURE, THE HILLEL FOUNDATION, JANUARY 27, 1963

Moderator: I would like to welcome you all to Hillel this evening. When we have a series like this, there is always a tendency to multiply introducers. As host, I guess, I am happy to welcome you all and then very quickly to call upon Mr. George Anastaplo,[4] who helped arrange, or actually did arrange this evening series. Mr. Anastaplo, as is well known to you, is lecturer in liberal arts at the downtown center of the College, and he will introduce both the series and the speaker of this evening. Mr. Anastaplo!

Anastaplo: It is a privilege to have Mrs. Pekarsky here this evening, especially since this is a series dedicated to the memory of her late husband, and I like to think that this is a series that Rabbi Pekarsky particularly would have enjoyed.[5] We prepared several such as this in recent years, and this is one that he was working on, in fact, the last one that he was

4. George Anastaplo (1925–2014) was professor at the Loyola University Law School and in the Basic Program in the Liberal Arts at the University of Chicago. He appealed the refusal of the Illinois Bar's Committee on Character and Fitness to admit him all the way to the US Supreme Court (losing by a 5–4 decision in 1961). The "thorough study" Strauss refers to in the Q&A period is Anastaplo's PhD dissertation, "Notes on the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States of America" (University of Chicago, 1964), published as Anastaplo (1971/2005).

5. Rabbi Maurice B. Pekarsky (1905–62) was director of the Hillel Foundation at the University of Chicago.

working on before he had to be taken to the hospital last summer. I should add that the preparation of the series is in large part due to Mr. Ralph Lerner[6] and to Mr. [Werner] Dannhauser,[7] who will be lecturing next Sunday evening, same time. Our program will consist of the talk, and then a question period, then tea or coffee afterwards, and brochures can be gotten afterwards for the remainder of the series. I turn now to the lecture of the evening. It is fitting and proper, I believe, that a distinguished professor of political philosophy who was regarded so highly by Rabbi Pekarsky during an association of almost a decade and a half, or almost two decades, should open this series on "Religion and Commonweal." Mr. Strauss will speak on the tradition of political philosophy.

Leo Strauss: Ladies and gentlemen, Mrs. Pekarsky. This is the first time that I have the honor to give a lecture in Hillel House after the death of my friend Rabbi Maurice Pekarsky. Permit me to pay homage to his memory. The soul and substance of Rabbi Pekarsky was Jewish piety, simple old-fashioned, chaste, Jewish piety. He dedicated his life to keeping alive this holy fire, or to revive it. He knew very well how difficult this task was in the middle of the twentieth century, especially at a university like ours. He acted in this difficult situation with singular tact and prudence. He did not protest against those who tried to reduce Judaism to social ethics on the one hand, and to an ethnic culture on the other, since both parties retain a part, however small, of the ancient truth and since their very antagonism, the antagonism between the universal and the particular, points to the full truth: the chosen people, the people chosen to be witness of justice. He did not rebuff, nay he attracted those who were not as blessed as he was, who had not succeeded in finding a way of reconciling the old piety and the new science, for he was united with them in love of truth. This was indeed the limit of his tolerance and forbearance. He just tolerated, for he was a very polite man, those for whom the university is above all a place for promoting themselves. I believe, and after having heard Mr. Anastaplo, I know that he would have approved of the effort of Mr. Anastaplo and his friends, which is to explore how one can secure by human means the future of religion without infringing on the rights of man.

6. Ralph Lerner is the Benjamin Franklin Emeritus Professor at the University of Chicago and author of works on medieval political philosophy, the Enlightenment, and American political thought, including Lerner (2016).

7. Werner J. Dannhauser (1929–2014) was professor at Cornell University and Michigan State University and the author of Dannhauser (1974).

I would like to say first a few words about how I plan to approach this subject. I speak, of course, as a social scientist. A social scientist is a man who is sworn to face and pronounce also unpleasant truths, truths unpleasant to himself. There are two kinds of unpleasant truths: unpleasant truths which are at the same time pleasant, and simply unpleasant truths. I give an example of both. For example, it is not altogether unpleasant for a friend of big businesses to point out the vicious, the unpleasant power of the labor unions; nor for a friend of the labor unions to point out the unpleasant power of big businesses. These are pleasant facts for these people, facts on which they thrive. The truly unpleasant facts are those which render questionable one's party line. For example, like Yalta [Conference] for the professional liberal, and strong central government with a terrific defense budget for the professional conservative. It is in this spirit that I approach my subject: what does the tradition of political philosophy teach regarding religion and the commonweal? Voltaire has said "celui qui n'ose regarder fixement les deux pôles de la vie [humaine], la religion et le government n'est qu'un lâche."[8] He who doesn't dare to look straight at the two poles of life, religion and government, is only a coward. In the language of our time, the two poles of life are government, the subcultural, and religion, the supracultural. Two stern and exacting things, as distinguished from culture. If we understand politics and religion in terms of culture, we obscure the fundamental difficulty: government, the commonweal, is necessarily particular; religion is, at least according to its intention, universal, embracing all men. If we look at everything from the point of view of culture, we forget the universal, because culture is something used in the plural; we forget the universal, the truly human, for culture as the term is now used is essentially particular.

Now if we were to follow this thought, we might be compelled to question the concept not only of culture, but even the concept of religion. Religion is not a Hebrew term nor a Greek term. It stems from Latin. Piety is indeed a universal term. But is religion the same as piety? That is a rather subtle question. When we say of a man he is religious, and when

8. The complete quotation, including the first sentence which Strauss drops here, is as follows: "Le partage du brave homme est d'expliquer librement ses pensées. Celui qui n'ose regarder fixément les deux pôles de la vie humaine, la religion et le gouvernement, n'est qu'un lâche." (The lot of a good man is to explain his thoughts freely. He who does not dare to keep his eyes on the two poles of human life, religion and government, is only a coward.) The complete quotation appears as the epigraph of Strauss's 1939 manuscript entitled "Exoteric Teaching" (Strauss 2014a, 275). Strauss's source is the 1782 essay entitled "Something Lessing Said" by Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, who quotes this passage with some alterations at the end of his work. The passage is originally from Voltaire's *L'A, B, C, ou Dialogues entre A, B, C.* See Voltaire (1994, 142) and Jacobi (1996, 209).

we say he is pious, I think we do not in all cases mean the same thing. For example, I do not believe that anyone ever called [Martin] Buber pious, whereas he is of course a religious man. But let us not be or appear to be pedantic. Let us say, as we are entitled to say by our Western tradition, that religion simply means every human concern with a personal god, with a god who thinks and wills and is concerned with man, with every man, or, to use a current expression, a being who is a "Thou."[9] As for the political philosophy mentioned in the title of the lecture, I have made its meaning sufficiently clear for our present purpose by speaking of the *tradition* of political philosophy. Political philosophy, I indicated, is something which is not precisely thriving in our age, not in spite but because of the fact that the word "philosophy," and "political philosophy," is used in our time, I believe every day, more than it was ever used in the past. This is one of the characteristics of our times. Just to illustrate what this means: the word "historic" is doubtless now used with great prodigality. Every day we read of another "historic" event, and these events prove to be worthy of a headline today but to be forgotten tomorrow, and surely not later than next year. So in other words, we suffer from a kind of inflation regarding these words, and this applies to the word "philosophy" too. Inflation must not deceive us about the *scarcity* of the real stuff, and this applies to political philosophy itself. Yet, however absent political philosophy may be from our age, all present-day discussions, for instance of the question of religion and the commonweal, are based, whether the discussants know it or not, on political philosophy. This is incidentally especially true of the so-called liberal position. The liberal position regarding this issue is surely not based on religion, Jewish or Christian, but on the unassisted human mind alone, and hence on philosophy.

Now one thing one may say while being reasonably certain that it will be permitted to pass by everyone is this: political philosophy emerged in Greece, and the classical document of Greek political philosophy is Aristotle's *Politics*. Let us then begin here: What do we learn from Aristotle on our subject? Somewhere in the seventh book of the *Politics*, he enumerates the functions, the works, essential to the commonweal. He mentions six of them in ascending order: from food, below, to government, at the top; and in this enumeration there occurs the following strange expression: "fifth and first, the concern regarding the divine."[10] What does he mean by that? In the first place, he means: no commonweal or city is possible without religion, without established religion, a state

9. See Buber (1970).
10. Aristotle, *Politics* 1328b11–12.

religion obligatory on all citizens. In the sole remark which Aristotle makes in his own name on natural right, he indicates that sacrificing to the gods, and hence of course also praying, belongs to natural right. It is by nature just that the citizens pray and sacrifice.[11] Every society must have this concern with the divine as a *public* political concern. Now this concern is the first, in a way, Aristotle says "fifth and first." It is the first because it is more necessary even than food, and at the same time it is higher even than the government. But in another respect it is not the first, therefore he says "*fifth* or first." The divine in itself is surely higher than anything human. But what Aristotle speaks of here, the political concern with the divine, this is not the highest. This political concern with the divine is something radically distinguished from *knowledge* of the divine, and knowledge of the divine would be, according to Aristotle, the highest human pursuit. This kind of concern, the political kind of concern, is neither the highest nor is it the most fundamental. Aristotle explains this in a passage of the *Metaphysics*, twelfth book, very famous in the Middle Ages, in the Latin Middle Ages, [where Aristotle speaks of thinkers] at the beginning, and quote "the opinion of the fathers."[12] Now what does he say there? He speaks there of the popular notions regarding the gods which underlie public established religion. These popular notions contain an element of truth, but they are not completely true: something untrue is added to them. Why? "For the persuasion of the many, and for use in regard to the laws and to the useful [i.e., the politically useful—LS]."[13] The laws, the ordinary political laws, need, in a sense, superhuman support. Laws as Aristotle understands them cannot be simply rational or reasonable, because the simply rational or reasonable does not have a great force. The reasonable is powerful in the arts, in medicine, shoemaking, strategy, or what have you, but it is not regarding laws. Laws owe their validity decisively to *custom*, to habituation, not to their intrinsic rationality, and therefore they need another support, a superhuman support.[14] Religion, in a word—if we translate Aristotle's term, "the concern with the divine by religion," as we may—religion is *civil* religion, political religion, a part of the political establishment. We can also use another term, not occurring in Aristotle but somewhat later: we can say there is a "civil theology" as distinguished from the true philosophic theology. This term is best known from a quotation in Augustine, traced to some

11. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1134b23–25.
12. Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1074b13 (πάτριος δόξα).
13. Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1074b4–5.
14. Aristotle, *Politics* 1289a20–23.

Stoics, but the thought is of course clearly in Aristotle.[15] Now this view is not peculiar to Aristotle. I mention a few points. Plato: Everyone knows the thesis of Plato's *Republic*: the rule of philosophers is *the* condition for public happiness. But if you read this in the context of the *sequel* of the *Republic*, the dialogue called *Timaeus*, you see that the rule of philosophers takes the place not simply of the rule of the people, or of the aristocrats, or the kings, but especially it takes the place of the rule of *priests*.[16] The rule of philosophers is, as it were, the only adequate answer to the rule of the priests.

I will now only assert that something of this kind, religion as civil religion, is a teaching of all classical philosophers. *The* example is the famous case of Socrates. Socrates was accused of having committed an unjust act by not worshiping the gods of the city. Now what does this mean? Did he not bring the sacrifice or did not bring them in an orderly, law-prescribed manner? Plato's *interpretation* of the charge is this: Socrates did not believe that the gods worshiped by the city of Athens *exist*. This is infinitely graver than to omit occasionally a sacrifice, as he admits having omitted at the end of his life, when he says to Crito, "We have forgotten to bring a sacrifice to Asclepius."[17] You know this was not quite orthodox, and he gave this as a last injunction to his friend: "Bring that sacrifice tomorrow." Surely, Socrates did not preach that the gods worshiped by the city of Athens do not exist, but, which is much graver, in his famous *Apology*, he does not meet that charge. When you read it, you see that he does not refute it. He lays a trap for the accuser, and the accuser, a fool, goes into the trap, and then Socrates is out of all difficulties. But it is surely not a refutation of the charge. Socrates somehow claims, of course, that he is not guilty as charged, and therewith by implication, after he is condemned, that he is *innocently* condemned. But this is a somewhat queer story. When someone, a very enthusiastic admirer of Socrates, says, "How terrible, Socrates, that you have been unjustly condemned," Socrates laughs—the only time he ever laughed—and says, "Would you prefer that I were justly condemned?"[18] [laughter] But there can be no question if you read the evidence that he was guilty as charged. Now, he cannot deny to the polis, to the city, the right to demand that every citizen believes in the existence of Zeus, Hera, and the whole lot. He makes only one reservation where he would refuse to obey the city: even if the city would enact legally a law forbidding philosophizing, he

15. Augustine, *The City of God* 4.27.
16. Plato, *Timaeus* 24a–b.
17. Plato, *Phaedo* 118a.
18. Xenophon, *Apology of Socrates* 28.

says he would disobey that law.[19] But such a law was not in existence, and would probably never have been enacted in these terms. What he does not, of course, speak about is the connection between the prohibition against philosophizing and the prohibition against not believing in the existence of the gods worshiped by the city of Athens. He goes so far in the *Apology* to say that his philosophizing is due to a straight command of a god, of Apollo, who had commanded him to philosophize. Now again, if you read it, you see that Apollo didn't do anything of this kind. When [Apollo was asked] the ambiguous question, when he was asked by another enthusiastic admirer of Socrates, "Is anyone wiser than Socrates?" Apollo or the priestess said, "No, no one is wiser than Socrates," which of course is not exactly a command: "Socrates, you must philosophize!" Socrates interpreted it to mean that he is wiser than the others according to the gods, because he knows that he knows nothing; and therefore in order to convince himself and others, he goes around in Athens and shows up everyone who *pretends* to be wise. And of course that is not too difficult for him: he shows that these men who pretend to be wise are in fact very unwise. And then he gets very unpopular by that, and the end of it is the condemnation. But however large a view we may take of how oracles can be interpreted, it stretches the thing a bit to say that it was a clear injunction of Apollo.

Now Plato, after the experience of Socrates, made an honest effort to solve that problem shown by Socrates's fate, namely, that he is a philosopher who as such cannot believe in the gods worshiped by the city of Athens, and philosophy and the city are incompatible. How can one make them compatible? This is a great problem which Plato solved in the *Laws*, especially in the tenth book, where he shows what the proper legislation regarding religion would be, namely, to demand from every citizen belief in those gods whose existence can be demonstrated (the existence of Zeus and so on can never be demonstrated), and these are what we may call the cosmic gods, meaning the heavenly bodies which Plato thought were animate beings. And in this better city of the *Laws*, only this rational belief is demanded from every citizen, and of course then also legally enforced. And Socrates could have lived and died without any difficulty in such a city. The punishment for unbelief there is very complicated. One has first the impression that it is capital punishment in every case, but this is not quite true because if a man is just, has led a just life, and is not orthodox along the lines of this *rational* religion, he will not be condemned to death; this is made clear later on.

19. Plato, *Apology of Socrates* 29d.

This much about Aristotle and Plato. But some could say: but in all cases there *must* be a public religion which every citizen must accept. But one could say: were there no radicals in classical antiquity—liberals, as some people say? Now there are quite a few people today who assert that, and they refer to such people as Protagoras, who of course was not an Athenian citizen, but who lived in Athens for a while and got into troubles because his book began roughly with the sentence, "Whether the gods are or are not, I do not know. The difficulty or the remoteness of the subject matter and the brevity of my life prevent me from finding out the truth." And he has been called an agnostic because he didn't formally deny but only expressed his doubt. But one must also say that—and there were such people—neither Protagoras nor any other man of whom we know something engaged in *propagating* this view. These were people who in very private circles of refined society said these things, and perhaps to some extent also in writing, but we have only fragments of these writings; we do not know how that thing looked in the whole book. It is always dangerous to judge on the basis of fragments. The view fostered in our age by some Marxist and crypto-Marxist authors that the lines were roughly drawn in antiquity as in our time: a right and a left, and the right were these cursed fellows Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, the reactionaries; and the left were the precursors of John Dewey [laughter]—just, I mean, a piece of fiction which has no basis. The clear, very clear statement by Edmund Burke will help to clarify the situation. Burke said somewhere, "Boldness formerly was not the character of Atheists as such. They were even of a character nearly the reverse; they were formerly like the old Epicureans, rather an unenterprising race. But of late they are grown active, designing, turbulent, and seditious."[20] These old irreligious people were not an enterprising race, they were sometimes what we now call intellectuals, and in other cases a kind of bums [laughter] living at the margin of society, but that had no political importance. We can safely say that the political philosophy which existed in classical antiquity is that of men like Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, and the Stoics. The other people who could be regarded as precursors of modern liberalism were not *politically* interested. There was not a ghost of a chance of a hope that this kind of thought could become *politically* relevant. Good.

Now let me summarize then this point. No religion—I mean the view which Aristotle implies, and which Aristotle, Plato, and others imply. And please understand me: I take now religion in the precise sense as a translation of what Aristotle means by "the concern with the divine"

20. Burke (1881, 355).

as the fifth and the first, nothing more. But one must be somehow precise. I have heard people say in this country: Well, I am a religious man, I am a scientist! If you call any dedication religion, then of course one can say every dedicated man is religious, but I think this is a gross misuse of words. Now if I state then the view of the classics coherently, I would say this: no religion is *true*, but *some* religion, *any* religion is politically necessary. Law and morality are insufficient for the large majority of men. Obedience to the law and to the moral rules is insufficient for making men happy—well, the well-known fact that wicked are happy and the just live in misery. Law and morality are therefore in need of being *supplemented* by divine rewards and punishments. The *true* supplement to law and morality is, however, philosophy, but philosophy is essentially the preserve of *very few* men, because a special *nature* is required for becoming a philosopher. Religion is here not meant to be the work of philosophers. None of these philosophers believed that he could *found* a religion. Religion is a work of the *founders* or legislators, and philosophy simply *finds* that and has to accept it. Yet philosophy can and should affect or modify religion. While it is indispensable to the city, religion also creates certain dangers to the city. Famous cases: earthquakes and eclipses interpreted as bad *omina*: panics in the army. Well, what do you do if you have an enlightened general, like Pericles, like Scipio? He will give a brief lecture to the army and tell them that has happened perfectly naturally and there is no omen in it.[21] So [that is] an interesting question, and the first book of Cicero's *Republic* is the most coherent discussion of that. Or another case: the famous naval battle of Arginusae, which the Athenians won, but there the generals or admirals didn't take care of picking up, not the shipwrecked soldiers, but the corpses. Now according to the Athenian religious notion, the corpses have to be brought *home* to be buried properly, and the generals were condemned to death.[22] Now here there was another case where from the philosopher's point of view some information about the irrelevance of the mere corpse, as it is given for example in Plato's *Phaedo*, would have been helpful for the sake of humanity.

Forgive me if I mention also an example from Jewish history: no fighting on Sabbath. You know, at the beginning of the Maccabean wars, no fighting on Sabbath; and then it simply had to be changed because it proved to be impossible.[23] Another example which goes *through* the ages from classical antiquity on: the institution of religious asylum. Someone touching an altar, a murderer, is protected by this very fact—an *irrational*

21. Strauss (1958, 208).
22. Strauss (1968, 656–66).
23. First Maccabees 2:41.

practice which must be changed. The most urgent and famous question today of this nature is of course the question of birth control, as you all know. The position in this respect of the philosophers was clearly indicated by the Jewish *pious* poet Judah Halevi, who said that the philosophers, in contradistinction to religion or Judaism in particular, do not recognize a single rule of action, of conduct which is universally valid. In other words, when the common good is in danger, there is no rule which cannot be disregarded.[24]

Now what was the actual influence of philosophy on religion in this respect? Well, one can say there was a fairly liberal religious practice, for example in Athens for some time, and that had to do with the fact that Pericles was under the influence of men like Anaxagoras, a philosopher, and other cases. There was also a very liberal practice in the Roman Empire to some extent. But this liberal practice is one thing, and *legal* protection is another. If we are concerned with *legal* protection, we must say classical antiquity was radically *illiberal*, philosophic or nonphilosophic. There was nothing corresponding to the First Amendment. No freedom of religion was recognized in theory or in practice. To repeat, what happened was in certain cities for certain periods very liberal practice because of easygoing people, but when it came to a *test*, this liberalism could not be defended. Now, the danger from this point of view was not that the polis represses religious *freedom*—this they did not even *desire*—but the undue influence of religion or priests on the city. About this they were seriously concerned, but they did not demand in any way freedom of religion. Religious repression, or positively stated, religious uniformity, is a need; the *true* concern with the divine is knowledge in contradistinction to prayer and sacrifice. And the basis of that is, to elaborate one point I indicated before—the fundamental human fact, so to speak, is the gulf between the philosophers and nonphilosophers, whom they called the *demos*, the common people. The very *ends* of the philosophers and the nonphilosophers differ, and therefore the freedom which the philosophers can have cannot be had by anybody else.

But there is a point which is not altogether unimportant: the philosophers recognized the existence of an *intermediate* group between the philosophers and the *demos*, and these are the people whom they called the *educated* people, people who have *listened* to philosophers and have come under their influence. In more social terms, the gentlemen. A gentleman meant here an urban patrician. According to the orthodox doctrine, this urban patriciate had to derive its livelihood from agriculture,

24. See Strauss (1952a, 95–142).

but as a matter of fact it was largely commercial, and I think that the history of philosophy, viewed from the point of view of mere sociology of philosophy, is to a large extent the history of a commercial patriciate. This, I think, goes until the eighteenth century. This was the social basis of philosophy strictly understood.

It is absolutely necessary that I say a word on what I have called political theology.[25] Now by political theology I mean teachings based on divine revelation, like the Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and perhaps others. And from the point of view of any form of political theology, one particular religion is *the* true religion; whereas from the point of view of the philosophers, *no* religion is the true religion. Let us look for one moment at the difference between the three universal monotheistic religions. Judaism does not demand from all men that they become Jews: as you know, only those born from a Jewish mother. Christianity demands—Christianity in principle—from all men, but tolerates Jews with great disability. I am speaking now of course of the situation up to, what, 200 years ago. Islam tolerates Jews and Christians with considerable civil disabilities. Now this had of course to do with the fact that Christians recognize Mosaic revelation and the Muslims recognize the Jewish and Christian revelation although they do not recognize the books. Now does the Jewish position entail recognition of a right to be irreligious? This, I believe, is a question which we must raise with a view to the burning question of our time. I would say: No! The basis of traditional Jewish toleration, or however we might call it, is the famous sentence that the pious—or the righteous, as people say—among the nations of the world, i.e., amongst the non-Jews, have a share in the world to come, which in Christian understanding means they will be *saved*. But righteous is—the word is the pious—it goes without saying that is simply understood that these righteous men will of course believe in God. Maimonides, who is generally regarded as the greatest Jewish authority in post-Talmudic times, *limits* this high position to non-Jews who recognize and perform the so-called seven Noahidic commandments, the commandments which were already given according to the Bible not later than Noah's time, that is to say, after the Deluge, immediately after the Deluge. And they include such prohibitions against murder and theft, and so on, and of course also against idolatry. But Maimonides limits this toleration to non-Jews who recognize and perform these seven Noahidic commandments on the basis of the Mosaic revelation. That is to say that anyone who abstains from these actions because he is, has natural inclination towards that abstention, or

25. Strauss (1959d, 13).

because his reason has led him to abstain from them does not belong according to Maimonides to these pious among the gentiles. In practical terms, that means Maimonides limits this toleration to Christians and Muslims, because they of course by definition recognize the Mosaic revelation.[26] Pagans are excluded, and this creates some problem because one of the pagans was Aristotle, whom Maimonides admired very highly. In the discussion about this decision of Maimonides, which became more and more shocking, the more the modern liberal notions prevailed within Judaism, a defender of Maimonides in the older view quoted from the 9th Psalm, verses which I may read in English translation: "the wicked shall be turned into hell and all nations that forget God. Arise O Lord, let no man prevail, let the heathen be judged in thy sight."

I must mention one point, because this becomes important later on. On the basis of political *theology*, in contradistinction to political philosophy, there is this fundamental difficulty. What is better: no religion or a false religion? I mean, given the fact that there will be people who will not have *the* true religion, what is better? In other words, what is better or worse: atheism or a living faith in a beast like Moloch? Because faith in Moloch is of course religion of a sort, and atheism clearly is not. The true religion is known as such only by revelation, not by reason or nature, and therefore there cannot be a *natural* obligation to worship and to love God, *the* true God. This is recognized by Thomas Aquinas: not reason *simply*, but reason informed by *faith* teaches that God is to be loved and worshiped.[27] This means that—deviating from Aristotle, and deviating because for Thomas Aquinas that is *the* true religion—Thomas teaches that divine worship is not strictly speaking an institute of natural right, for natural theology, i.e., the natural knowledge of God's existence and so on, does not lead to the insight that God *alone* must be worshiped, which is of course the principle of Christianity, as it is of Judaism and Islam. Now natural theology does not lead to the insight that God alone must be worshiped, because the alternative being the Aristotelian view, the belief in the eternity of the world, and on this basis the heavenly bodies, for example, are eternal and therefore can legitimately be called gods, as they are called by Aristotle, and then there is no reason why they shouldn't be worshiped. This much, I think, is clear.

Now let me continue with my theme proper. Freedom of religion as a right, as it is recognized in the First Amendment, is something specifically modern, especially in that interpretation according to which freedom *of*

26. *Hilchot Melachim* 8:11.
27. *Summa Theologica*, I–II, q. 104, art. 1.

religion includes the freedom of *irreligion*, and this is I think the only interesting case. But someone can say: Is not freedom of religion in the widest sense simply the right of the *conscience*, which includes the right of the *erring* conscience and therefore also in principle of atheism? This is a Christian view, to which I have to say first that conscience is not a philosophic conception but it stems from Christian theology, at least in this meaning. Hence this line of thought does not belong to the tradition of political philosophy. Secondly, however, I believe that the freedom of the erring conscience is not freedom for any false religion. I mean that the erring conscience is *excused* doesn't mean that the man of the erring conscience has a full *legal* right, for example, to *propagate* his false teaching. We also cannot entirely divorce the ecclesiastical teaching according to which the erring conscience *binds*—it binds, it doesn't give rights—from consideration of the ecclesiastical practice. One can say, however, that freedom of religion is an indirect consequence of the Reformation, the whole story with which you are familiar since your grade school days: the Reformation, the religious wars, the ruin of Europe, the desire to stop that bloodshed and the devastation, tolerance. There is no question about this historical concatenation. One must also mention that there were certain *sects*, Christian sects from the very beginning of the Reformation who were in favor of toleration. But again I say, and that is not merely a verbal excuse, this is not political philosophy. These sectarians who wanted their freedom of religion on the basis of certain *Christian* notions of the conscience and of faith, these were surely not philosophers.

However, *prior* to the Reformation, or at any rate independently of it, certain *modifications* of classical political philosophy occurred within political philosophy. I mention two names: The first is Sir Thomas More, *Utopia*, which is written fundamentally from a philosophic point of view, published in 1516, that is to say one year before the outbreak of the Reformation. Now in this perfect commonwealth, *Utopia*, which is described there, the established—there is an established religion—is, however, *the* natural or rational religion, something which Plato had somehow *hinted* at in the *Laws*. But everyone is free to add to it of his own; for example, if he thinks he should worship, say, Mercury, the star [planet] Mercury, in addition to the one cause of everything, he is perfectly free to do so. No one can be *persecuted* on account of his religion. Everyone may follow the religion which he likes, except that no one who doesn't believe in the immortality of the souls and in providence can be a citizen. This is the absolute limit. So there *is* an established religion. No one may defend his religious views differing from the accepted views in *public*, but he may defend it before priests and serious men, grave men,

viri graves. But again, there is no punishment for infraction. The public cult is uniform, but does not violate anything peculiar to anyone's *private* religion. For example, there is no prayer which *everyone* could not speak—I think you are reminded of many contemporary facts by that; it's very interesting, in 1516! In brief, a society united in and by *the* true religion of reason. It tolerates additions to it, but no *subtraction*.

The contemporary of More who also made a considerable change in the traditional doctrine was Machiavelli, in his two great books which were written at about the same time as *Utopia* was. I mention only one point, the only point of epoch-making importance. Machiavelli teaches that a public religion is *indispensable*, as everyone else had taught before him, but he makes this qualification: for *republics*, not in absolute monarchy; there the strong arm of the prince can supply what religion otherwise gives. So this is a kind of inkling of the so-called *enlightened* despotism of the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries. I do not know of any suggestion of this kind from earlier literature, but let us keep in mind the implication of Machiavelli: while an irreligious absolute monarchy, despotism, may be possible, an irreligious *republic* is not.

Now the change which was effected by Machiavelli—and the man who in these matters is his successor surely, Hobbes—is fundamental, because it concerns the relation of philosophy and the commonweal. I must, unfortunately, say a few words about that. The change, in brief, consists in two elements. [Strauss interrupts his talk, and asks the moderator for more time: "Do I have 20 minutes?" "Yes, sir."] The first is this: science is for the sake of power. Science is not—and science means always philosophy, that is not different at this time—science is not for its own sake but for the sake of power, for the "relief of man's estate," as someone[28] called it. That implies that from now on, the ultimate end of the philosopher and the end of the nonphilosophers are the *same*. There is no longer that gulf which existed in classical times; and the formula for that end, which is the best which was ever coined, was Locke's formulation: comfortable self-preservation.[29] A second difference: the common people, the nonphilosophers, can become enlightened. The philosophic-scientific teaching does no longer remain a *preserve* of a so-called intellectual elite, but is spread, is broadcast, and transforms the whole citizen body. Science becomes for the first time a *public* power. It becomes a public power because it forms the minds of large masses of men.

28. Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning* 1.5.8.
29. *First Treatise*, § 87.

Now what is the situation of our problem in this stage? Hobbes, whose construction is still the clearest and most lucid in existence, Hobbes starts from a very massive fact which has very much to do with toleration, namely, fear of violent death, because persecution naturally culminates in killing people. Violent death is the greatest evil and this must be avoided by government, i.e., peace at all costs is a fundamental condition, and this of course requires strong government. I mean, whenever government is divided, there will be all kinds of frictions, legal delays, and so on. *Unqualified* sovereignty—and he preferred monarchy, i.e., absolute monarchy. Religion owes its legal power *only* to the uncontrolled and uncontrollable act of the sovereign. Say, if Christianity is an established religion in England, that is due to an act of British kings or kings and Parliament and not to any intrinsic truth which it might have. The sovereign can determine *which* religion is to be established as he sees fit. This means of course also that he can *disestablish* it as he sees fit. The Christian is obliged in conscience to commit idolatrous and blasphemous acts if his sovereign so commands, because obedience to the sovereign is *the* fundamental duty.

And now comes the interesting turn: the sovereign may establish or disestablish any religion he pleases, but he is not *obliged* to establish *any* religion, any public worship which as such would be uniform. He may, as Hobbes puts it, allow many sorts of worship. Many sorts of worship. In that case, however, he goes on, and it is extremely interesting, "it cannot be said that the commonwealth is of any religion at all."[30] Why? Because there is no public religion, no established religion. The consequence is that Hobbes admits at this passage—a unique passage in this work, but an important one—that an *irreligious* commonwealth is possible. Or to state it quite bluntly, an atheistic society is possible. This is one of the greatest events in the history of thought proper [our problem?].

Three years after Hobbes's death, a French writer, Pierre Bayle, published a book, *Pensées diverses* [*sur la comète*], diverse thoughts on a certain comet which had appeared, and which spells out what in Hobbes is only once mentioned. I must say a few words about this book, which I think is one the most important works in this whole development. Bayle opposes the belief that comets are omens, a belief still very strong in the seventeenth century, but an issue which we would all regard as extremely trivial. Now, he gives eight reasons why comets are not [omens]—it's a large book, 400 or 500 pages. Eight reasons. The seventh reason is a theological reason, and the only theological reason which he adduces

30. *Leviathan*, chap. 31.

against the belief in the comets. He argues as follows: if comets were evil omens, God would have made miracles in order to confirm idolatry. If they are omens, if they say something, then they are not merely natural events, they are miracles. And since comets were used in pagan antiquity and in China for idolatrous purposes, God—you see that is a very neat piece of theological reasoning—God would have miracles in order to confirm idolatry. But then here comes an objection: but God might very well have confirmed idolatry, because it is a *lesser* evil than *atheism*. That the Greeks or the Chinese are idolaters is better than that they were atheists. Then a response, Bayle's response, to this objection is the following: he denies that atheism is necessarily such an evil. Atheism does not necessarily lead to immorality. And in this connection he does something. He proves, or he attempts to prove, the possibility of an atheistic society. It is an enormous step. Atheism is altogether innocent. I can't suppress mentioning his theological argument proper, which is taken from the analogy of human jealousy. Opposed to idolatry is God's jealousy. He says a husband is less jealous if his wife does not love any man, including himself, than if she loves another man [laughter].[31] You know, he uses the old principle of analogy for his very novel purpose.

Now this epoch-making event, which is connected with the names of Hobbes and Bayle, remained, however, subterraneous and did not in any way affect public policy or public discussions until the nineteenth century, when an open atheistic propagation with a political or social purpose came into open, especially of course in socialism and communism. But something took place, say, between 1670 roughly and the French Revolution, which met the eye and the grounds of which were not discerned by everyone, but the men who were responsible for it knew it very well. In other words, that part of the iceberg which became visible was a technique, the technique of the enlightenment of these philosophers. Two rules: *multiply* sects, and *deflect* the attention of men from the otherworldly goal to this-worldly goals. The empirical basis, the Dutch Republic, which was the model, regarded as the model, because of religious tolerance: every sect can have freedom in Holland and they are getting richer and richer, whereas Spanish monarchy gets poorer and poorer from day to day [laughter]. So there is a connection, a connection between these two things: multiplication of sects plus economics, we can say. That was the technique of these men who steered this big conspiracy, I think we can say, of the late seventeenth century and the eighteenth century.

31. Bayle (2000, 75–97, 134–136 [§§ 57–78, 103]).

Now the great political philosophers of that age (of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries), apart from Hobbes, do not of course go so far as Hobbes and Bayle do. I mention these three names: Locke, famous fighter for tolerance, but severe limitation—surely no tolerance for atheists, explicitly. In his case, not even for Catholics. That had of course to do with the British settlement. Spinoza: a state religion in a republic, absolutely necessary. The state religion must be based on either the Old Testament or the Old and New Testaments taken together, so the Jews and Christians are alright. Naturally, he gives an extremely great freedom of interpretation—for example, everyone must believe that God exists; but he may just say that *matter* is God; then he complies. In other words, it is almost zero but still, legally no toleration for atheists. That's important. And the last great man of this tradition, Rousseau, who as everyone knows demanded a *civil* religion as absolutely necessary, and he has been accused by some people who know nothing *prior* to Rousseau, and know only nineteenth-century liberalism, that he was a terrible totalitarian and I don't know what, whereas he was in this respect only the last relic, so to say, of the older view. Good.

So in other words, in this great period, formative period of modern times, there is a considerable modification of the overall understanding but clearly no freedom of irreligion. Tolerance means for all practical purposes tolerance for every religion, but not for *irreligion*. I believe one has to take this into account if one wants to understand the First Amendment, because the First Amendment and the American constitution altogether is after all a product of the eighteenth century, or the great authorities there; the philosophical authorities are all men of the eighteenth century. I believe one has to consider this very seriously. The question what all individuals responsible for the Constitution, for the Federalist Papers, but for the Constitution as a whole, thought privately is utterly uninteresting; the point is what they could publicly defend. This would have to be considered. Now of course in the nineteenth century, it seems, freedom became *unlimited*, unlimited, and this is a tradition to which people defer. Now let us look for one moment at the greatest representative of free libertarianism in the nineteenth century, and that is, as I believe everyone would admit, John Stuart Mill. But let us not look at *On Liberty*; let us look at his *Autobiography*. I must bore you with a few quotations:

> I was brought up from the first without any religious belief, in the ordinary acceptation of the term. My father, educated in the creed of Scotch Presbyterianism, had by his own studies and reflections

> been early led to reject not only the belief in revelation, but the foundations of what is commonly called Natural Religion. . . . [His father's] aversion to religion, in the sense usually attached to the term [LS: Do you see the hedging? I am not simply irreligious only in the sense usually attached to the term] was of the same kind with that of Lucretius: he regarded it with the feelings due not to a mere mental delusion, but to a great moral evil. He looked upon it as the greatest enemy of morality. . . . I am thus one of the very few examples, in this country, of one who has, not thrown off religious belief, but never had it [laughter]. I grew up in a negative state in relation to it. . . . [LS: Obviously even in England he will not be so rare today.] This point in my early education had, however, incidentally one bad consequence deserving notice. In giving me an opinion contrary to that of the world, my father thought it necessary to give it as one which could not prudently be avowed to the world. This lesson of keeping my thoughts to myself, at that early age, was attended with some moral disadvantages [in the original: "could not but be morally prejudicial"].[32]

One more point, and then I am through with these quotations and almost through with my lecture, when he was running for Parliament, much later, of course:

> A well-known literary man was heard to say that the Almighty himself would have no chance of being elected on such a programme [LS: That on which he ran]. I strictly adhered to it, neither spending money nor canvassing, nor did I take any personal part in the election, until about a week preceding the day of nomination, when I attended a few public meetings to state my principles and give answers to any questions which the electors might exercise their just right of putting to me for their own guidance, answers as plain and unreserved as my Address. On one subject only, my religious opinions, I announced from the beginning that I would answer no questions; a determination which appeared to be completely approved by those who attended the meetings.[33] [laughter]

32. Selections from chap. 2 ("Moral Influences in Early Youth. My Father's Character and Opinions") in Mill (1981, 41–44).

33. Chap. 7 ("General View of the Remainder of My Life") in Mill (1981, 274).

Exceedingly interesting, how the freedom of religion—or from religion, rather—which Mill exercised as distinguished from what he demanded in his *On Liberty*, was still along the lines of Locke, Spinoza, and Rousseau, rather than of John Dewey.

I'll summarize that point. What is *the* issue? The issue seems to be this: Does the commonwealth require religion for its well-being, and may it therefore legitimately demand from every citizen that he has *some* religion, i.e., that he believes in God? Or can an atheistic society be a good society? I would like to define atheistic society lest there be any doubt. Of course, there is no society in which all members are atheists. An atheistic society is a society in which no public governmental act and no publicly supported act has any reference whatsoever to god—this is a clear case in the USSR—or in which no man suffers from *any* politically relevant disability, as distinguished from a mere legal disability, on the ground of his professed atheism. What is uppermost in our minds is a question, a question of American constitutional law, namely, the correct interpretation of the First Amendment. Does the freedom of religion mean freedom for all *religions*, but *only* for them, or does it give an equal freedom *from* all religion? I believe that it is impossible to settle this legal question of utmost gravity if one does not settle first the theoretical question, the discussion of which we have begun tonight. This is all I have.

[Applause]

[Tape change]

Strauss: And just not standing on ceremony, he or she who has a ready question, indicate so by any means short of firecrackers [laughter].

Student: Do you believe that a public support of religion can be as influential today when there are so many sources of irreligion in society? Do you believe that a public support of religion can be effective today as compared to, let's say the past, where society was quite different?

Strauss: This is a very complicated question, but I believe it is not the first question. The first question is: Is it desirable? And that is the question that one must really have before one's mind's eye: an atheistic society as defined, and a nonatheistic society. And say, let it—well, of course we take a nonatheistic society as we *wish* it, not necessarily like one in the past which may have been defective on a thousand grounds. That is the question. And then the question of whether any legal compulsion, whether any use, is an entirely different [one]—but there are—for example, in this question the famous case which I do not wish to touch, not being a trained constitutional lawyer, I mean the prayer in public schools, this is an

example of what the practical issues are.[34] You see, it was an old maxim of wise men of the past that legislation can only follow a certain state of preparedness of public opinion. By public opinion I don't mean what the Gallup Poll means, but the settled convictions, not necessarily coming out in questionnaires, on which people habitually act. You know?

Same Student: It would seem to be desirable to support religion publicly, and that—it would—working on that premise, the gravity of the question would depend—well, the gravity of the issue of whether religion should be publicly supported or not depends in part on the effectiveness of the public support of religion, and there are many people who would deny that the school prayer or something of this sort can have real effect on the training of children when there are so many other things—

Strauss: These things cannot be weighed, they cannot be measured. No one can know what a certain phrase heard, stated drowsily, repeated drowsily, but remembered in a key moment of one's life, would mean. Now if this phrase was never heard, it will not be remembered. Even Stalin remembered—in a conversation with Churchill, I remember—when they spoke about the Great War situation, and he said something like this, "God helps!"[35] Well, he of course had gone even to a priest seminary and so had a more than ordinary religious education. But you know what I mean; I am speaking now not exactly of habitual and thoughtless use, but in certain moments, if there is such an expression, any others I don't want to do that but I think I tried . . . the imagination of every one of you. That is unfathomable, unpredictable even, because these are all seeds, and whether the seeds will go up depends not only on the soil, also on the weather, and who can know that? I believe that all these methods, the quantitative methods, I don't think they make any allowance for these depths, although they even have now I hear depth interview [laughter]. But this depth is of course a relative depth, maybe what depth psychology means by depth. That may not be true depth. So that one

34. Engel v. Vitale, 370 U.S. 421 (June 25, 1962).

35. "May God help this enterprise to succeed!"—Stalin to Churchill, Moscow, August 12, 1942, in Sherwood (1949, 618). Sherwood continues, "(The translation of this remark, as given by Churchill to Roosevelt, was: 'May God prosper this undertaking!') I have been told that it was by no means unusual for Stalin, who had been educated for a time in a religious seminary, to invoke the aid of the Deity." (Strauss thought highly of this book and made a gift of it to Joseph Cropsey.)

cannot say. I think one must face first this question whether—I know there are people who would say if there were no religion whatever anymore, one would go to any synagogue or church and no one would ever pray and no one . . . and bless births and wedding and burial would be—would be relief for the world. I am sure that Lord [Bertrand] Russell thinks along these lines. And he is not the only one, quite a few people. But alright! But one must really figure it out. One must look at it detachedly and soberly: How would this affect human beings, and all kinds of human beings? And the other way—and if this is not a desirable thing, if this is not a desirable thing, then one must see: Well, what can one do? Is it possible that any governmental action in the widest sense—not necessarily legal actions; you know there are also certain things which are simply done in statements by leading statesmen and so on, as what could be done, what could be implemented. In any case, the decision either way has effects in unexpected quarters. Unexpected quarters. And that I would say is the primary question. This raises questions of immense practical importance but as all practical questions, it presupposes somehow a theoretical decision. Mr. [Donald] Reinken?[36]

Reinken: To ask what is perhaps the other half of that gentleman's question: Where would the area of the greatest expense and cost be, if it is taken seriously, of reestablishing a state-established religion believing in a providential god?

Strauss: The established religion—religion in the strict sense, as you mean it when you speak of established, means of course a *particular* religion. To mention the two examples in this country, Christianity and Judaism—because I think we can disregard Islam in spite of the Black Muslims.

Student: No, I didn't mean putting Cardinal Spellman[37] in the White House, but something milder, taking—we already have "In God We Trust" on the currency. God is known to be Mammon, by the religious people (Strauss: inaudible [laughter]) but reversing the trend away from the prayers in the public functions to make it essentially politically

36. Donald Reinken (1934–2018) held a PhD in mathematics and served as a reader of the text under consideration in many of Strauss's courses.

37. Francis Joseph Spellman (1889–1967), an American bishop and cardinal of the Catholic Church.

impossible for people to succeed in public life without avowing a trust in a providential god—what some have called the "first church of your choice" religion.

Strauss: But still, whatever this may be—I mean, if it is a religion, it is surely a belief in a providential god, isn't it? And the question is simply not the question of the establishment of any *particular* religion, it is a question of, to what extent—I think the simplest statement of the problem as it has frequently been stated is: Does the First Amendment mean freedom for *all* religions, or does it also include freedom *from* religion? That is the question. Of course, there is another point—I should have looked it up, remind me, Mr. Anastaplo, even admitting that it means only freedom *for* religion, what about the freedom of *speech*? Maybe the freedom of speech would protect irreligious speech as much as religious speech, and therefore we would be up against a similar difficulty, that is quite true. Yes?

Student: Doctor, I wonder if, once we accept the principle that freedom of religion, meaning freedom to practice any religion in a state—I wonder if perhaps—

Strauss: By the way, with some qualifications. Mormons. But they are trivial, they are not . . .

Same Student: I wonder if that does not imply that in the eyes of the state, that one religion is as good as another. This isn't the implication of that?

Strauss: I believe that in the moment that is abandoned, I believe the state would then cease to be a liberal state proper. I mean, that I believe is really meant from the very beginning, that there must not be any identification of the state with any particular religion.

Same Student: Well, if that is the case, doesn't it follow logically, or does it follow logically that freedom of religion, implying that in the eyes of the state one religion is the equal of another, doesn't that follow that it is freedom from religion?

Strauss: No. Because the example, for example, of Thomas More already prior to the modern development proper shows that. There can be something which one can loosely call (but sufficiently precise for

practical purposes) a rational religion. You know, today the term has become discredited, and today people speak of the Hebrew-Christian tradition. That is a historical term roughly for this. . . . Perhaps naturally the term religion would also have included quite a few pagans who did not share in the Hebrew-Christian tradition. That I think is the practical issue today. I believe no one has the intention of establishing any religion, even Christianity in general—you know, as distinguished from the difference between Catholicism on the one hand, and any Protestant variety on the other. This is not the issue.

Well, of course I deliberately didn't go into one very big question which indeed belongs to a theoretical consideration but not to the constitutional consideration. And that is whatever the law, including the constitutional law, may say, the state of mind of the citizen is at least as important. You know? So that, for example, in say, around—in 1800 there would be no question that the overwhelming majority of American citizens were practicing Christians. While not a *legal* fact, it was politically immensely important. Well, if you remember the last election, when for the first time a non-Protestant became president of the United States. And you know how politically relevant the nonlegal—I mean not the illegal, but the nonlegal—facts are. I mean, that is, I believe, what political sociology is concerned with, you know, these kinds of things which do not appear in law but are very powerful politically. Into this, I didn't go; which of course we should also consider. But I suppose that today the fact that a *considerable* minority of the American people is no longer either Christian or Jewish in any religiously relevant sense of course has created this underlying present situation. I mean, I don't believe that you can state these things very clearly in statistical terms, but this is, I think, the basis, something again, a nonlegal fact, a nonlegal fact as possible under the Constitution, as in the other cases the whole population would adhere to one and the same particular religion—which is of course equally possible legally, and yet it would give society an entirely different character than it has in the two cases. One has surely to consider both possibilities: what one might call the religiously homogenous liberal democracy, and an atheistic liberal democracy. Both are theoretically possible. One should consider that. Although in fact, I believe, the liberal democracies are all in countries which are not religiously homogenous. Is it not true? Or did I forget anything? Surely Holland has a considerable Catholic minority, Britan has a smaller one, but on the other hand a large variety of Protestant sects—where do you, pardon?

Reinken: Scandinavia, where the church—

Strauss: That is correct. Scandinavian countries are so to speak religiously homogenous—Protestant, Lutheran.

Reinken: But very diluted, they are almost gone now.

Strauss: But there because a large part of the population is no longer *really* Christian. And that would be an interesting object of study, how this change occurred—you know, not political change in the narrower sense of the term but of course decisive for the character of the society. Yes? Oh no, this lady was first, I'm sorry.

Student: What theoretical difficulty would you see in a position that it's possible to have a well-ordered and viable society which has . . . a public ethics assisting, without—the obligation of which lies solely and strictly in teleological goals decided upon by the society at large, a strictly—an ethics that is only good so long as the society could decide on certain goals, and which would be changed if the goals were altered.

Strauss: But what kind of goals? Cannibalism?

Same Student: No, let us say a society were to form goals that are very much similar to the goals many people say our nation has got now.

Strauss: So you say decent goals. That's a great difference. Alright. But let us assume decent goals; but then the question is this: Is the dedication of the society to decent goals and I suppose also of the *serious* part of the population—otherwise society consists of individuals—is this sufficient, humanly sufficient? You doubtless have heard, and probably know much more about this than I do, about the fact which is sometimes called insecurity—insecurity, which even decent people have—and loneliness—you know, loneliness and this kind of thing. So I think in order to be realistic you would have to say: dedication to decent goals plus psychiatry, because psychiatry would then be the only way in which these problems of the individual, which are not solved by this dedication to decent goals, would be solved. Now I don't say that this is a *complete* picture, but I believe it is somewhat more complete than the one that you drew: decent goals, say, social welfare, socialism or, you know, welfare state plus psychiatry. This we have to some extent; we are on the way to it.[38] But again the question is: "Is this what one can be *satisfied* with?" would be the question. One would have to face that.

38. Strauss (2014b, 5 [Session 1, October 6, 1971]; 2017, 98).

Same Student: Could one add that perhaps a public ethics based on mutual goals with the addition that there is a complete and total freedom to be both religious and irreligious . . .

Strauss: I couldn't hear the last part of it.

Same Student: Adding that one could have whatever religion privately one chose to one's personal—

Strauss: But this is I believe not the question, because that is understood according to any interpretation of the First Amendment, that the Constitution does not prescribe to any individual which religion he or she has. There are other questions which are more subtle into which I cannot go; there is a limit to every discussion. For example, there are people who say that Buddhism, for example, strictly understood is an atheistic religion. I mean, in other words, it is not mere—how shall I say?—spiritual emptiness, but it is something spiritual and yet it is atheistic. That I have heard. Now this would have to be considered, this kind of thing; and especially I hear there is now in some circles in the United States a great movement, numerically probably not very strong, in favor of Zen Buddism. Have you heard of that? I have heard of it [laughter]. But still, if one wants to have a complete picture, one must without any fastidiousness take into consideration all these kinds of things. My promise was a very limited one: to state what the fundamental issue is which one has to face if one wants to reach clarity about a seemingly purely legal constitutional law question. If I may repeat this once more, the interpretation of the Constitution, as I learned from a very thorough study by Mr. Anastaplo, which I had the pleasure to read, comes always up against the question: What was in the minds of the founding fathers? Now this can be *partly* established of course by their explicit utterances, but since they were not strictly speaking theoretical men, then one must find that out to some extent by studying the theorists who influenced them. Well, Locke is of course always mentioned in this connection, but perhaps others also have to be considered. In brief, the state of political philosophy and its latitudes which were limited in the late eighteenth century. You agree with that, don't you? And this is what I tried to supply to some extent. Mr. [Charles] Butterworth.[39]

39. Charles E. Butterworth is Professor Emeritus at the University of Maryland, College Park, author of works on medieval Islamic political philosophy and translator of Alfarabi, Averroes, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, most recently of Alfarabi (2015).

Butterworth: What would be, if any, the grounds for reconciliation between the philosophical view that says "no one religion is true" and the religious view which says "our religious view is the truth"?

Strauss: No—practical reconciliation, practical forbearance, no theoretical reconciliation, as I believe. I mean, there are all kinds of things—for example, take perhaps the most famous case: Hegel who said *the* philosophic system has shown *the* truth of the Christian dogma. But by this very fact, of course, he transformed the Christian dogma into a philosophic theorem where all nonphilosophic things were dismissed as merely imaginary irrelevancies. You know? There are also Jews who have done the same thing. But this, I think, conceals the issue. The older view, the simple older view, that there is natural reason and there is suprarational revelation, which of course would not be accepted by [the] philosopher as suprarational, but yet by virtue of the clear distinction keeps at least alive the problem and doesn't *conceal* it by a sham identification. Yes?

Student: An extension of that question: if the political philosopher is in principle a nonbeliever, yet on the other hand somehow in principle has governing responsibilities in the society, doesn't his status, so to speak, as a nonbeliever point the way for an atheistic society? Is there some kind of unbridgeable gap between the political philosopher and the—

Strauss: That is a long question. In practice, all kinds of combinations are possible. But this may very well be due to the human and all-too-human desire to eat the cake and have it. But if we speak now about serious men—I mean men who take *intellectual* responsibility—I think that is perfectly clear that the philosopher—I mean, I refer you to Thomas Aquinas himself—that philosophy as philosophy is not dependent on faith. I mean, that is a kind of *fideistic* view which Pascal may have had and other people, but which surely is not the Thomistic view. There is a sphere in which human reason can exert itself, and that is of course meant by the word "philosophy" or "science" and political philosophy is a part of it. Now the key controversy is this: Is the sphere of philosophy so *essentially incomplete*, while being autonomous in itself, that it *points* toward its completion in revelation? And if I understand Thomas well, he says that's the case, it is incomplete and points toward this completion. But by the fact that Thomas teaches that and acts on that teaching also theoretically, he is a theologian who uses philosophy, and one can perhaps say he is a better philosopher than other philosophers are. That is probably what you would say. But it is still something which is no longer

possible on the basis of philosophy as such, and since even all proof of the defects of philosophy, the defectiveness of philosophy, are of no great help if you do not get the supplement, and since this supplement is accessible *only* on the basis of faith, the conclusion follows.

Same Student: Assuming that you don't get this supplement, I think, I got the impression in your lecture that you suggest that political philosophy as such implies nonbelief. Admitting that Thomistic philosophy suggests—points to something more, and you don't get that something more; and also assuming that the political philosopher has some governing responsibility to the community.

Strauss: But he can fulfill that only on the basis of human reason. And I would say that, and I believe that Thomas Aquinas would say, that the guidance which political philosophy gives for the commonweal is genuine guidance as far as it goes, I mean for this-worldly ends.

Same Student: But won't that guidance necessarily be in conflict with the civil religion, assuming the political philosopher is a nonbeliever and this is a principle?

Strauss: Why should that be? Well, if you take even the doctrine of Rousseau, what does it amount to? That there are sanctions, superhuman sanctions for morality; the content of the morality is entirely determined by human reason. I mean, I do not wish to—the very contrary, I wish to make as clear as possible that there are real questions there, but I would say *these* are the real questions, not some which are ordinarily discussed. And I would like to add one point, which I said already at the beginning: some of you may have seen that I am not a 100% liberal. But the liberal position is today, at least in modern academic circles, almost omnipotent. Now this position, the liberal position surely, is based on philosophy alone—I mean, they don't call it philosophy anymore, but if you use the term unassisted human mind alone. I mean, the social sciences are not in any way based on revelation in any sense; I believe there is a universal agreement on this point. And therefore, for this reason alone, I would have been compelled to take up the issue, on this basis alone. Because otherwise one simply says: Well, you have your beliefs that are your private prejudices, these prejudices may be nice or they may be obnoxious, but this has no *standing* in academic discussion; that you would hear. I believe someone there raised his hand or finger. No?

Well, if we have exhausted the subject [laughter], there is no reason why we should not have tea.

[Applause]

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