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# Leo Strauss and the Grand Inquisitor

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There is a certain irony in the fact that the chief guru of the neoconservatives is a thinker who regarded religion merely as a political tool intended for the masses but not for the superior few. Leo Strauss, the German Jewish émigré who taught at the University of Chicago almost until his death in 1973, did not dissent from Marx's view that religion is the opium of the people; but he believed that the people need their opium. He therefore taught that those in power must invent noble lies and pious frauds to keep the people in the stupor for which they are supremely fit.

Not all the neoconservatives have read Strauss. And those who have rarely understand him, for he was a very secretive thinker who expressed his ideas with utmost circumspection. But there is one thing that he made very clear: liberal secular society is untenable. Religion is necessary to provide political society with moral order and stability. Of course, this is a highly questionable claim. History makes it abundantly clear that religion has been a most destabilizing force in politics—a source of conflict, strife, and endless wars. But neoconservatives dogmatically accept the view of religion as a panacea for everything that ails America.

Using religion as a political tool has two equally unsavory consequences. First, when religious beliefs become the guide for public policy, the social virtues of tolerance, freedom, and plurality are undermined, if they are not extinguished altogether. Second, the use of religion as a political tool encourages the cultivation of an elite of liars and frauds who exempt themselves from the rules they apply to the rest of humanity. And this is a recipe for tyranny, not freedom or democracy.

There have always been those who deluded themselves into thinking that they were akin to gods who are entitled to rule over ordinary mortals. But no one has described this mentality more brilliantly than Dostoevsky, when he created the figure of the Grand Inquisitor. In his short story of the same title, Dostoevsky imagined that Jesus has returned to face a decadent and corrupt Church. As head of the Church, the Grand Inquisitor condemns Jesus to death, but not before having a long and interesting conversation with the condemned man. Jesus naively clings to the belief that what man needs above all else is freedom from the oppressive yoke of the Mosaic law, so that he can choose between good and evil freely according to the dictates of his conscience. But the Inquisitor explains to him that truth and freedom are the sources of humanity's greatest anguish and that people will never be free because "they are weak, vicious, worthless, and rebellious." He declares that people can be happy only if they surrender their freedom and bow before miracle, mystery, and authority. Only then can people live and die peacefully, "and beyond the grave, they will find nothing but death. But we shall keep the secret, and for their happiness we shall allure them with the reward of heaven and eternity." The Inquisitor explains that the "deception will be our suffering, for we shall be forced to lie." But in the end, "they will marvel at us and look on us as gods."

To say that Strauss's elitism surpasses that of the Grand Inquisitor is an understatement. Undeniably, there are strong similarities. Like the Grand Inquisitor, Strauss thought that society must be governed by a pious elite (George Bush the second and the Christian fundamentalists who support him fit this role perfectly). Like the Grand Inquisitor, Strauss thought of religion as a pious fraud (something that would alarm the Christian fundamentalists who are allied with the neoconservatives). And even though Strauss was sympathetic to Judaism, he nevertheless described it as a "heroic delusion" and a "noble dream." Like the Grand Inquisitor, he thought that it was better for human beings to be victims of this noble delusion than to "wallow" in the "sordid" truth. And like the Grand Inquisitor, Strauss thought that the superior few should shoulder the burden of truth and in so doing, protect humanity from the "terror and hopelessness of life."

All the similarities between Strauss and the Grand Inquisitor notwithstanding, the Straussian position surpasses the Grand Inquisitor in its delusional elitism as well as in its misanthropy. This shows that while one need not be a religious thinker to be misanthropic, religion is an excellent vehicle for implementing misanthropic policies in public life.

The Grand Inquisitor presents his ruling elite as suffering under the burden of truth for the sake of humanity. So, despite his rejection of Christ, the Grand Inquisitor is modeled on the Christian conception of a suffering God who bears the burden for humanity. In contrast, Strauss represents his ruling elite as pagan gods who are full of laughter. Instead of being grim and mournful like the Grand Inquisitor, they are intoxicated, erotic, and gay. And they are certainly not too concerned about the happiness of mere mortals. They have little pity or compassion for them. On the contrary, the pain, suffering, and tragedies of the mortals provide them with entertainment.

The Trojan wars and similar tragic atrocities were festivals for the gods, intended for their pleasure and amusement. Nietzsche thought that only when suffering is witnessed by gods did it become meaningful and heroic. Soaring high, Strauss discovered that there are no gods to witness human suffering; and finding the job vacant, he recruited his acolytes. Strauss thought that the best way for ordinary human beings to raise themselves above the beasts is to be utterly devoted to their nation and willing to sacrifice their lives for it. He recommended a rabid nationalism and a militant society modelled on Sparta. He thought that this was the best hope for a nation to be secure against her external enemies as well as the internal threat of decadence, sloth, and pleasure. A policy of perpetual war against a threatening enemy is the best way to ward off political decay. And if the enemy cannot be found, then it must be invented.

For example, Saddam Hussein was an insignificant tyrant in a faraway land without the military power to threaten America. And he wasn't allied with the Islamic fundamentalists who attacked the World Trade Center in 2001. But the neoconservatives who control the White House managed to inflate the threat to gargantuan proportions and launched the nation into a needless war. Even though they are not hardcore Straussians, neoconservatives share Strauss's view that wealth, freedom, and prosperity make people soft, pampered, and depraved. And, like Strauss, they think of war as an antidote to moral decadence and depravity. And this should make us wonder if they purposely launched the nation into a needless war because they were convinced of the salutary effects of war as such.

There is a strong asceticism at the heart of the neoconservative ideology that explains why it appeals to the Christian Right. Neoconservatism dovetails nicely with the views that humanity is too wicked to be free; too much pleasure is sinful; and suffering is good because it makes man cry out to God for redemption. With the neoconservatives and the Christian Right in power, Americans can forget about the pursuit of happiness and look forward to perpetual war, death, and catastrophe. And in the midst of all the human carnage and calamity that such policies are bound to bring, the Olympian laughter of the Straussian gods will be heard by those who have ears to hear it. In short, the Straussian elite makes the Grand Inquisitor look compassionate and humane in comparison.

The fact that so many of the most powerful men in America are self-proclaimed disciples of Leo Strauss is rather troublesome. For example, Abram Shulsky, the director of the Office of Special Plans, which was created by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, was a student of Strauss. Shulsky was responsible for finding intelligence that would help to make the case for war in Iraq. We know now that the intelligence was false and misleading. Shulsky tells us that he learned from Strauss that "deception is the norm in political life."10 But deception cannot be the norm in public life without subverting democracy and robbing people of the opportunity to deliberate freely in light of the facts.

Another important Straussian close to the Bush administration is William Kristol, editor of the *Weekly Standard* and chairman of the Project for the New American Century, in which the neoconservative foreign policy is clearly outlined. Kristol wrote his thesis on Machiavelliæa theorist who was much admired by Strauss for everything except his lack of subtlety. Strauss endorsed Machiavellian tactics in politicsænot just lies and the manipulation of public opinion but every manner of unscrupulous conduct necessary to keep the masses in a state of heightened alert, afraid for their lives and their families and therefore willing to do whatever was deemed necessary for the security of the nation. For Strauss as for Machiavelli, only the constant threat of a common enemy could save a people from becoming soft, pampered, and depraved. Strauss would have admired the ingenuity of a color code intended to inform Americans of the looming threats and present dangers, which in turn makes them more than willing to trade their liberty for a modicum of security.

Paul Wolfowitz, deputy secretary of defense and assistant to Vice President Dick Cheney, is also a self-proclaimed follower of Strauss. Like many of Strauss's students, he is animated by a sense of missionæa mission to save America from her secular liberal decadence. And what better solution is there to secular liberal sloth than a war effort? I am inclined to give these powerful students of Strauss the benefit of the doubt by assuming that they have no idea of the sinister depths to which Strauss's political thought descends. And I think that by revealing aspects of Strauss's dark philosophy, I may dissuade some of them from following Strauss too blindly into the abyss.

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## Leo Strauss 101

EDWARD FESER reviews:

*Reading Leo Strauss: Politics, Philosophy, Judaism*, by Steven B. Smith

http://nrd.nationalreview.com/article/?q=NzE5MTRlZGY5YmY1MTUyOTZkYWY5NThmZGQ2NTNjOTU=

An enormous amount of nonsense has been written about Leo Strauss over the last several years. Liberal journalists who appear never to have read a word of the long-dead philosopher's work assure us that the war in Iraq is a practical application of his ideas. Tim Robbins's anti-war play *Embedded* portrays Strauss as a sinister ideologue who promoted deception of the masses as a means of fostering a militant nationalism. Nor has the nonsense all come from the political left. Conservative writer Daniel Flynn suggests, in his book *Intellectual Morons*, that Straussian methods of textual analysis may have led the Defense Department into a faulty reading of pre-war intelligence vis-a-vis Saddam's purported WMD stockpiles.

Yale professor Steven Smith's book is intended, in part, to dispel such myths, and provides a sober and lucid overview of Strauss's thinking about matters of philosophy, politics, and religion, albeit from Smith's interpretive point of view. His emphasis is on Strauss's defense of liberal democracy as a solution to what he called the "theologico-political problem"; in Smith's telling, Strauss's defense rests on a kind of philosophical skepticism. Smith is clearly sympathetic to Strauss's views as he understands them; he succeeds in his attempt to show that those views bear little resemblance to the caricatures now in circulation, and are worthy of the serious consideration of liberals and conservatives alike. Unfortunately, in his desire to distance Strauss from Bush-administration policy in particular and neoconservatism in general, he sometimes overstates his case. More significantly, he fails to consider some potential difficulties facing the Straussian worldview as he has interpreted it. Still, his take on Strauss is instructive, and if he doesn't answer all the important questions he at least raises them.

In this, Smith is very Straussian indeed. Strauss understood philosophy as concerned with the "permanent problems" — traditional questions about the nature and grounds of justice, the existence of God, and so forth — that are "permanent" because, it is alleged, no settled answers to these questions are possible. In Strauss's view, the thinker who decisively chooses one set of answers over the others has ceased to be a philosopher and become a "sectarian." But if philosophy is concerned with constant questioning and discussing, rather than with providing solutions or upholding hallowed dogmas, it poses a potential threat to traditional societies. Hence the "theologico-political problem," the inevitable conflict between philosophy and divine revelation, reason and faith, "Athens and Jerusalem."

On Smith's interpretation of Strauss, liberal democracy provides the best solution to this problem, or at least (as Churchill would have put it) the worst except for all the others. Its tendency to foster toleration and open-mindedness recommends it to the philosopher as the sort of regime most conducive to his way of life, and its allowance for private religious discrimination in exchange for neutrality between religions in the public sphere makes it possible for traditional believers to practice their ancient ways as they see fit without threatening the liberty of non-believers to choose to do otherwise.

And yet liberal democracies have dogmas of their own, especially egalitarian ones. They also tend to cater to the lowest tastes and impulses, so that while they value science and technology for the consumer goods they provide, democracies make high culture and higher moral sensibilities difficult to maintain. This in turn threatens the stability and longevity of the democratic regime itself. For these reasons Strauss believed that a true friend of democracy ought never to be its "flatterer." The philosopher ought, in his view, to uphold the older ideal of democracy as a "universal aristocracy," in the face of the vulgar "mass democracy" that has displaced it. This requires defending and practicing liberal education as a means of inculcating an understanding and respect for the permanent problems, and thereby producing an elite fit to govern on the basis of wisdom

and merit rather than birth. It also requires a certain degree of caution, since — given the inherently elitist character of liberal education — the philosopher is bound to find himself at odds to some extent even with a democratic regime.

Here is where critics of Strauss and his followers often accuse them of advocating a resort to the "noble lie," and in particular of a false populism that cynically caters in public to fundamentalist religious believers whose faith Straussians privately reject, as a way of upholding public order and traditional morality. But, as Smith notes, this accusation is misconceived on two counts. First of all, while Strauss was not himself an orthodox believer, neither was he a convinced atheist. Since whether or not to accept a purported divine revelation is itself one of the "permanent" questions, orthodoxy must always remain an option equally as defensible as unbelief. Second, what Strauss was in favor of was neither lying nor the active promotion of any particular doctrine, but rather mere tact, silence, or — at worst — obfuscation where one's teaching might seem to threaten the unsophisticated but decent opinions of the people who make up the bulk of society.

This alleged predilection for the "noble lie" is something Strauss is supposed to have inherited from Plato, and, in general, Strauss regarded his political philosophy as Platonic in character. Here another controversial aspect of Strauss's work comes into play, namely his idiosyncratic interpretations of many of the great thinkers of the past. Plato is often regarded as having proposed, at least as an instructive ideal, a "utopian" society that can only be described as totalitarian, but, as Smith tells us, Strauss considered this merely an ironic warning against the dangers of utopian thinking.

Strauss also showed little interest in Plato's famous "Theory of Forms," the idea that there are timeless and objective essences of things, existing in a realm apart from either the human mind or the material world, and knowledge of which is the goal of philosophical inquiry. This view is typically regarded as the paradigm of a philosophy committed to the existence of objective truth, and it has had an enormous impact on the history of Western thought, and indeed Western civilization in general. Yet Strauss was dismissive of it, regarding it as a "fantastic" and "utterly incredible" doctrine. Plato's real concern, in Strauss's view, was similar to his own: not contemplation of the Forms but rather the activity of contemplation itself, the asking of the permanent questions rather than the answering of them.

Strauss's glib dismissal of the Forms was oddly reminiscent of the scientism or positivism whose stranglehold over modern intellectual life he was wont to criticize. Furthermore, Strauss's insistence that the genuine philosopher must be skeptical about the possibility of finding solutions to philosophical problems risks providing aid and comfort to the relativism he believed posed the greatest threat to modern liberal democracies. To be sure, to say that we cannot discover objective answers doesn't entail that they don't exist, but this is a distinction that is bound to be lost on the average non-philosopher, for whom the view that no answers are possible sounds little different from the view that every answer is as good as every other. These are issues Smith would have done well to explore.

Smith is also unconvincing, and occasionally unfair, when attempting to divorce Strauss's thought from recent neoconservative policy. He tells us that he does "not regard Strauss as a conservative (neo- or otherwise) but rather as a friend of liberal democracy" — as if being conservative (neo- or otherwise) excluded being in favor of liberal democracy, and indeed, as if neoconservatives were not frequently accused of being too eager to spread liberal democracy around the globe! He informs us that Strauss was a staunch Zionist, resisted internationalism of the sort enshrined in the U.N., and was critical of liberalism's lack of self-confidence in the face of Soviet Communism. Smith even finds echoes of this failure of self-confidence in the "self-doubt, if not self-contempt" evinced by many liberal intellectuals in response to the rise of Islamism. Yet after all this, he peremptorily asserts that Strauss's writings imply a critique of the war in Iraq.

Smith's justification for this claim is that Strauss would have been skeptical of the utopianism inherent in pro-war rhetoric about bringing an "end to evil"; for evil, Strauss would have insisted, cannot be entirely eliminated in this life. But surely such political boilerplate must be distinguished from actual policy. To my knowledge, the Bush administration hasn't proposed an invasion of Hell. And its willingness to ally the United States with the likes of Pakistan and Saudi Arabia surely proves that the idealism, however heartfelt, has indeed been tempered by an understanding of geopolitical reality. One would think a student of Strauss, of all people, would know how to read between the lines, and understand that stirring rhetoric is part of the job description of the statesman.