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978-0-521-73843-9 - Civil Religion: A Dialogue in the History of Political Philosophy

Ronald Beiner

Excerpt

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Introduction

[P]olitics . . . issues commands about everything in the state.

– Aristotle¹

Civil religion: the appropriation of religion by politics for its own purposes. Why is this an important theme in the history of political philosophy? When religion asserts its *own* purposes, which are not those of politics, it poses an absolutely fundamental challenge to political authority, and politics cannot take lightly such a radical challenge to its authority. However, civil religion is itself quite a radical response to this predicament. This is why thinkers within the liberal tradition shy away from civil religion or try to come up with a less radical way of resolving the same predicament. This is the source of the profound three-way dialogue within the tradition of political philosophy – between religion, civil religion, and liberalism, which together offer a whole spectrum of possibilities of politicizing or depoliticizing religion.

Leszek Kolakowski offers his own succinct encapsulation of the idea of civil religion. He writes that “a kind of perverse theocracy . . . seemed to be encouraged even by the implacable Church-haters” – citing Marsilius of Padua, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Spinoza, and Montesquieu as exemplars of this intellectual tradition.² (In fact, Kolakowski could even have included Nietzsche in this,

¹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Martin Ostwald (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1962), p. 173. The context is a quick sketching of the issue of how the polis relates to the gods, which turns out to involve a reciprocal subordination: The gods are superior to the polis, but they are worshipped by the polis as the polis ordains. I would like to thank Crystal Cordell for alerting me to the significance of this text.

² Leszek Kolakowski, *Modernity on Endless Trial* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 179. A useful resource on the history of the idea of civil religion is Jeffrey R. Collins, *The Allegiance of Thomas Hobbes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), chapter 1. For a very interesting account of the importance of the civil-religion idea in modern political thought from Machiavelli to Hegel via James Harrington, see Mark Goldie, “The Civil Religion of James Harrington,” in *The Languages of Political Theory in Early-Modern Europe*, ed. Anthony

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in his view dubious, tradition.)³ Why would “church-haters” wish to embrace civil religion? If these thinkers perceive religion as politically subversive, or as posing a potential threat to political authority, then one evident theoretical strategy would be “to beat the religionists at their own game” – that is to say, to make politics itself the assertor of claims to authority that reach *beyond* politics or that transcend “merely” political authority.

What to do about religion? This is an inescapable problem of politics, and therefore it is a perennial question for political philosophy. The idea behind this book is a quite simple one, though its execution requires a complex work of interpretation and commentary. The idea is to situate John Rawls’s account of religion in the Introduction to *Political Liberalism* in the centuries-long dialogue within the history of political philosophy in which it properly belongs. Rawls himself of course makes little effort to situate his account within a historical and still-continuing philosophical dialogue. On the contrary, he presents the theoretical outcome he endorses as a historical achievement, that is, as a given (namely liberalism’s accomplished triumph as a fact of history). If these questions were once the subject matter of a living dialogue, then liberalism’s solution to the political problem of religion has rendered continuation of the dialogue redundant (or so we may be led to believe).

Civil religion is the empowerment of religion, not for the sake of religion, but for the sake of enhanced citizenship – of making members of the political community better citizens, in accordance with whatever conception one holds of what constitutes being a good citizen. “Liberalism,” with respect to this question, is the rejection of the idea of empowering religion *even for the sake of enhancing good citizenship*, and different theorists of liberalism offer different (but perhaps mutually reinforcing) arguments for rejecting the civil-religion idea. Presented in this way, civil religion and liberalism are opposing alternatives within the intellectual world of political philosophy, and the history of political philosophy can be cast (as it is cast in this book) as a continuing dialogue between these opposing alternatives.

This is a book written by someone with very little interest in religion as such. What deeply interests me is politics, and political philosophy as the articulation of far-reaching questions about the proper way to organize political

Pagden (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 197–222. Goldie sees this as a principled intellectual tradition, and therefore as deserving of more intellectual sympathy than it gets from Kolakowski. As regards Harrington, he offers a particularly interesting case of what is a major theme in Part I of this book, namely the congruence between civil religion and vehement anticlericalism (and, arguably, Shaftesbury offers another important example of the same theme). An examination of these two intriguing thinkers, however, will have to await a sequel.

³ Nietzsche is discussed in Part IV of this book. To anticipate our later argument about Nietzsche’s affinities with the civil-religion tradition, let us just mention that for Nietzsche, in common with Machiavelli (*Discourses on Livy*, II.5), the highest politics consists in the founding of new religions. In fact, one might speculate that Nietzsche’s sole aim in writing *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* was to prove that a single human being can sit down and invent a religion. What Moses and St. Paul did *can be done again*.

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life. Nevertheless, even an interest in politics and political philosophy obliges one to be at least indirectly interested in religion. For even liberalism, in its various versions, construed as an attempt to domesticate or neutralize the impact upon political life of religious commitment, is for precisely that reason necessarily preoccupied with the problem of religion. It is to explore such questions that I have written this book.

With a project as large as this one, one should not be sparing with one's disclaimers. The selection of thinkers who figure in this dialogue (or series of dialogues) certainly does not exhaust the range of political philosophers who are relevant to the theme of civil religion, and the interpretation of any given thinker certainly does not exhaust what that thinker contributes to theorizing the relationship between religion and politics.

Any attempt to reflect on the theme of civil religion within the context of the history of political philosophy will of course start with Book IV, chapter 8 of Rousseau's *Social Contract*. Rousseau highlights in an especially sharp way the opposing demands of civic life on the one hand and those of religious, and especially Christian, commitments on the other. "Christian republic . . . these two words are mutually exclusive."⁴ "[F]ar from attaching the citizens' hearts to the State, [the Christian religion] detaches them from it as from all worldly things."⁵ The religion that dominates Western political communities is in radical tension with the needs of political authority, yet religious profession of some kind is indispensable for a sound political order: "[A] State has never been founded," Rousseau affirms, "without religion serving as its base."⁶ Without question, Rousseau's chapter addresses with penetrating insight this basic problem; less clear is the extent to which it even comes close to resolving this problem – or was *meant* to resolve the problem. (Indeed, as I lay out in Part I, I am inclined to interpret the chapter as *intending* to show that the problem is in fact irresolvable, and in that respect it illuminates a dimension of political life more generally that is unresolvable.)⁷

⁴ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *On the Social Contract*, ed. Roger D. Masters, trans. Judith R. Masters (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978), p. 130.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

⁷ If, according to my argument in Part I (and contrary to conventional readings of Rousseau), Rousseau ultimately recoils from articulating a "real" civil religion, what would a truly robust civil religion look like? One candidate might be John Toland's *Nazarenus*, ed. Justin Champion (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1997). In Jonathan Israel's formulation, Toland's work constitutes an "astounding quasi-theological project . . . in which he seeks to dechristianize Christianity and remodel it as a republican civil religion." Israel, *Radical Enlightenment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 613. Trying to unravel the complicated discursive games being played in *Nazarenus* is too ambitious a task to be undertaken here. Roughly, Toland is involved in interpreting the original Jesus cult – through the medium of a spurious "fifth Gospel" – in a way that repositions it closer to Judaism and Islam, and farther away from St. Paul's version of Christianity. (He offers a "Christianisme Judaïque et Mahometan," to cite the title of the original draft of the work.) In this sense, *Nazarenus* replicates (in Toland's own uniquely provocative way) some of the theoretical strategies explored in Part I of this book. But if Toland is to be

Political philosophy is generally a response to underlying crisis. Plato's *Republic* was a response to moral crisis in the Greek world. Aristotle's *Politics* was a response to a crisis with respect to the very existence of the Greek polis. The work of Pierre Bayle was provoked by the revocation of the Edict of Nantes. Rousseau's *Social Contract* was a response to the crisis of the monarchical order in Europe. Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* is a response to the collapse of aristocracy. And so on. *Liberalism*, above all, is a response to the crisis associated with the religious wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This reverberates right through the whole liberal tradition, stretching right up to the most important work of the liberal tradition in recent times, John Rawls's *Political Liberalism*. Hobbes offered one kind of response to this challenge of religious sectarianism, and this context of religiously motivated civil war shapes his political vision in the most profound way. However, the most important work of political theory in response to the religious crisis of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is Locke's *Letter Concerning Toleration*. In my view it shapes his liberalism, and beyond that it defines the very meaning of the whole liberal tradition, in an even more profound way than his *Second Treatise of Government*. In a very far-reaching sense, liberalism as a political philosophy is a theoretical response to the challenge of the Protestant Reformation, and the religious–political wars that came out of the Reformation. Hobbes was certainly not a liberal in his politics, but his philosophical assumptions *are* liberal, and with respect to what each of them draws out of these shared liberal (egalitarian–individualist) philosophical assumptions, Hobbes and Locke represent two poles of the liberal tradition. As such, they represent two fundamentally opposing responses to the challenge of religion in relation to political community and political authority.

Has liberalism triumphed? What Montesquieu teaches (*Spirit of the Laws*, Book 25, chapter 12) is that the supreme measure by which one gauges whether the liberal regime has triumphed is the extent to which citizens quietly grow indifferent to religious preoccupations and have them supplanted by concerns about material comfort and commercial prosperity.⁸ What is the

considered a theorist of civil religion, one would have to relate these themes in Toland back to similar themes in James Harrington and Henry Stubbe. On civil religion in Harrington, see Goldie, "The Civil Religion of James Harrington"; on Stubbe as a source for civil-religion theorizing, see James R. Jacob, *Henry Stubbe, Radical Protestantism, and the Early Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), chapter 8.

⁸ Cf. Ian McEwan, *Saturday* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2005), p. 126: "It isn't rationalism that will overcome the religious zealots, but ordinary shopping and all that it entails... the promise of appetites sated in this world, not the next. Rather shop than pray." Straussians tend to interpret Montesquieu's suggestion about disarming religion by cultivating indifference rather than by confronting it head on as a kind of philosophers' conspiracy. Hence Thomas Pangle's claim that this text in *Spirit of the Laws*, 25:12, is "perhaps the most important single passage on religion in the entire *Spirit of the Laws*"; Pangle, *The Theological Basis of Liberal Modernity in Montesquieu's "Spirit of the Laws"* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), p. 102. This may well be true, but rather than interpreting it as part of a secret conspiracy, it can be viewed, more prosaically, as just a matter of Montesquieu's acknowledging what he took to be the sociological realities of modern societies.

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contemporary assessment according to this measure? Consider Iran, Algeria, the Sudan, Somalia, Nigeria, Ireland, Israel, Gaza, Lebanon, Pakistan, India, Turkey, Iraq, Afghanistan, Yemen. . . . The least that can be said is that the arrival of a liberal-bourgeois “end of history,” implying the permanent eclipse of preliberal – including theocratic – possibilities, is by no means self-evident.⁹ As a matter of fact, Fukuyama’s end of history itself came to an end in 2001 – a mere twelve years after it began! – when radical Islam literally pulverized premature expectations of a permanent and universal reign of bourgeois liberalism. This book is premised on the view that *even if it ultimately turns out that some version of liberalism is our best means of containing the dangers of religion*, we will understand the liberal project better by locating it within a broader range of nonliberal and antiliberal theoretical projects.

Modern secularism nearly put an end to the dimension of theorizing expressed in the civil-religion tradition. In that sense, as theorists, we should perhaps be thankful to radical Islam (and perhaps also to evangelical Protestantism) for very robustly putting these questions back on the philosophical agenda. When one thinks of the first epigraph to chapter 30 – a view of Nietzsche articulated by Karl Löwith that I strongly endorse – one is astonished that a radical atheist like Nietzsche can *also*, simultaneously, be a radical adversary of the Enlightenment and its process of secularization (which is obviously continuing right up to our own day). If this continues to surprise and puzzle us, however, it simply means we have not understood the core of Nietzsche’s theoretical challenge. For secularization expresses *precisely* the cultural trend toward flattening, homogenization, and cultural-spiritual atrophy that was of most urgent concern to him (and to Heidegger).¹⁰ As I argue in my Nietzsche

⁹ For a good survey of possibilities of “desecularization,” particularly in regard to Europe, see Peter J. Katzenstein and Timothy A. Byrnes, “Transnational Religion in an Expanding Europe,” *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol. 4, No. 4 (December 2006): 679–694. See also Peter L. Berger, “The Desecularization of the World: A Global Overview,” in *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*, ed. Berger (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), pp. 1–18. Among theorists, there is, at the moment, a good deal of fashionable talk about “postsecularism” as a, as it were, natural counterpart to postmodernism. Retracing the long and difficult process by which the Enlightenment made modern secularism possible, one should shudder (at least a little bit) at the facile notion of moving “beyond” secularism. One good reason for pursuing the kind of inquiry undertaken in Part II of this book is to make us a little more wary of postsecularism by providing some pertinent reminders about presecularism.

¹⁰ Nietzsche’s great trope here is “unbending the bow,” from the Preface to *Beyond Good and Evil* (also §§ 206 and 262, and *Genealogy of Morals* I.12). It is an image packed with paradox. As an enemy of Christianity, Nietzsche *ought* to be pro-Enlightenment, and in fact sometimes embraces strongly pro-Enlightenment rhetoric (e.g., *The Antichrist*, §§ 12–15; cf. *Beyond Good and Evil*, Preface: “Europe is breathing freely again,” and “we” are the “heirs” of the fight against Plato’s error). But “unbending the bow” is fundamentally an anti-Enlightenment image. If it is the “fight” against Platonism and Christianity that creates this “magnificent tension of the spirit,” then the final winning of the fight – the triumph of the Enlightenment and the vanquishing of Platonism/Christianity – is a disaster. Which side is Nietzsche on? The side of Platonism and Christianity, which produced a civilizational “nightmare” but also thereby contributed to tensing the bow? Or the side of the Enlightenment, which destroys an unhealthy error but also unbends the bow?

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interpretation, Nietzsche *blames* Christianity for its contribution to modern liberal secularization; hence he obviously does not see Christianity (especially Protestant Christianity) and secularization as philosophically opposed. A resurrection of illiberal possibilities strikes him as a sign of renewed vitality (and again the same is true of Heidegger).

Is civil religion still alive today as a theoretical possibility? One might say that civil religion has in some sense succumbed to the rationalism of the philosophical tradition *per se*. This actually goes all the way back to the beginnings of the tradition of political philosophy in Plato – namely Plato’s argument against the poets at the end of *The Republic*, with its implied critique of the inadequacy and unreliability of a merely religious habituation to virtue, of “custom without philosophy.”¹¹ Jürgen Habermas offers a contemporary expression of the same rationalist tradition when he proposes the possibility of “the social integrative powers of the religious tradition shaken by enlightenment” being supplanted by “the unifying, consensus-creating power of reason.”¹² The assumption here is that we *can* find other ways in which to hold a political community together. For the whole rationalist tradition stretching from Plato to Habermas, only philosophy can ultimately accomplish the task assigned by the civil-religion tradition to mere religion (whether Homeric or Judeo-Christian), namely to draw citizens into a stable and coherent political community. Again, it is striking that thinkers as radically different as Machiavelli, Hobbes, Rousseau, and Nietzsche all agree in finding this rationalist assumption extremely dubious.¹³

¹¹ *The Republic*, Book 10: 619c–d; cf. *Phaedo*, 82b–c. For commentary, see Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Plato and the Poets,” in *Dialogue and Dialectic*, trans. P. Christopher Smith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), pp. 61–62, esp. n. 9. Let me add that in his challenges to Homer, Plato wasn’t necessarily renouncing civil religion; more likely, what he wanted was to place responsibility for civil religion in the hands of philosophers rather than poets.

¹² *Habermas and Modernity*, ed. Richard J. Bernstein (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), p. 197. More recently, however, Habermas has modified his views concerning religion; see, for instance, “A Conversation about God and the World,” in Jürgen Habermas, *Religion and Rationality*, ed. Eduardo Mendieta (Cambridge: Polity, 2002), pp. 147–167; “Faith and Knowledge,” in Habermas, *The Future of Human Nature*, trans. Hella Beister and William Rehg (Cambridge: Polity, 2003), pp. 101–115; and “Religion in the Public Sphere,” in Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion*, trans. Ciaran Cronin (Cambridge: Polity, 2008), pp. 114–147. For a very interesting and helpful account of the Habermasian view expressed in such texts, see Simone Chambers, “How Religion Speaks to the Agnostic: Habermas on the Persistent Value of Religion,” *Constellations*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (2007): 210–223. As Chambers does a good job of explaining, although it may in principle remain Habermas’s purpose to make the moral insights of religion ultimately translatable into “profane philosophy,” this process of secular translation is in practice more or less never ending. Hence Habermas is anxious that religion not be culturally (or politically) excluded while it is continuing to contribute moral meanings that still await secular translation.

¹³ I will postpone a more definite verdict on the civil-religion tradition until the conclusion of this book. In the meantime, I want to discourage the inference that I am nostalgic about an age of theory when civil-religion theorizing was still possible. There are good reasons why civil religion has ceased to be a credible way to do political philosophy. Still, it is an important part of our tradition of political philosophy, and much can be learned by investigating not only why it is no longer possible but also what motivated this mode of theorizing in the first place.

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If politics could be thoroughly secularized, or if religion could be thoroughly privatized, the problem of politics and religion might be soluble. Neither of these appears to be possible. It follows that religion will *always* pose challenges for political life – challenges for which mere theory cannot be expected to furnish solutions. Therefore, if solutions to the dilemmas of politics and religion are what we expect or hope for from the tradition of political philosophy, we are likely to find these hopes and expectations sorely disappointed. The motivation for seeking wisdom on these questions from canonical thinkers must then lie somewhere else. If contemporary Islam and contemporary evangelical theocratic (or theocracy-aspiring) politics challenge liberal citizenship in fundamental ways, then they raise anew the kinds of challenges to which the original civil-religion tradition attempted to respond. In that sense, some of the most sobering predicaments of contemporary politics can be liberating and enlivening for wide-horizoned theory.

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PART I

MACHIAVELLI, HOBBS, ROUSSEAU

Three Versions of the Civil-Religion Project

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I

Rousseau's Problem

Bayle has proved very well that fanaticism is more pernicious than atheism, and this is incontestable. But what he did not take care to say, and which is no less true, is that fanaticism, although sanguinary and cruel, is nevertheless a grand and strong passion which elevates the heart of man, makes him despise death, and gives him a prodigious energy that need only be better directed to produce the most sublime virtues.

– Jean-Jacques Rousseau¹

The term *civil religion* comes from a particular text – Book IV, chapter 8 of Rousseau's *Social Contract*. Nevertheless, pursued with sufficient doggedness, radicality, and intellectual ambition, the idea of civil religion can open up to us not only the unique political thought-world of Rousseau's work as a whole but also the unique thought-worlds of *all* major figures in the tradition of modern political philosophy. More to the point, it can open up to us the dimension of full dialogue *between* these thinkers, and not just their own thought-worlds seen as singular wholes. It is in this sense that this book aims at the presentation of a dialogue, or of a set of dialogues. From the point of view of this dialogue within the history of political philosophy, one can say that when Rousseau composes his civil-religion chapter, he is already familiar with two possible solutions to the problem of adjudicating the uneasy relation between politics and religion offered by his predecessors in the tradition of modern political philosophy (to be explored in Chapters 2–5 of Part I); in that sense, the civil-religion chapter already inserts itself into a dialogue in progress. However, Rousseau rejects both of these possible solutions as undesirable. In the *Geneva Manuscript* he explores a possible solution of his own, but he jettisons this as well when he

¹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile, or On Education*, ed. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1979), p. 312, note. For a discussion of the tensions and paradoxes in *Emile* expressed in this astonishing footnote, see Chapter 17; cf. Rousseau's praise of Islamic fanaticism in "Essay on the Origin of Languages," in *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*, Vol. 7, ed. John T. Scott (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 1998), p. 317.

comes to write the *Social Contract*. Hence, readers of Rousseau who believe the *Social Contract* should be interpreted as a determinate and realizable blueprint for an ideal political community need to think hard about the fact that the book concludes with the statement of a crucial political *problem* for which Rousseau is unable to propose any solution that he himself regards as acceptable.²

The *Social Contract* concludes with a stunning paradox. The key statement of Book IV, chapter 8 is that “a State has never been founded without religion serving as its base” (“*jamais État ne fut fondé que la religion ne lui servit de base*”).³ This statement occurs in the context of a very penetrating analysis that lays out what one presumes to be an exhaustive survey of religious–political possibilities. There are two main alternatives: The first, to which Rousseau attaches the label “natural divine right,” is strictly otherworldly in its focus and finds its purest embodiment in the Christianity of the Gospels; the second, which Rousseau refers to as “civil or positive divine right,” embraces a variety of more worldly, theocratic regimes. These divide basically into two types: the fairly inclusive, local civil religion of Roman and other paganisms; and the more universalistic and therefore imperialistic theocracies of Islam and Judaism. All national religions will appear parochial relative to the universalism of Christianity, but as the contrast between Judaism/Islam and paganism shows, this parochialism can have either a (relatively) tolerant or aggressive cast. Rousseau also presents a third, hybrid, alternative – “mixed right” – which offers a kind of dual-sovereignty model, dividing authority between church and state. In practice, it means that the priests are tempted to usurp temporal authority for themselves, and to this extent undercut the established authority of the state. Rousseau calls it “the religion of the priest” and agrees with Hobbes in denying to this worldly–otherworldly religion any moral claim whatsoever. The most blatant target of this polemic is of course Catholicism, but as Rousseau concedes in the paragraph referring to Hobbes, this dividing of sovereignties is

² Terence Ball very helpfully assembles all the wild and misguided judgments made upon the civil-religion chapter by Rousseau scholars: See “Rousseau’s Civil Religion Reconsidered,” in Ball, *Reappraising Political Theory: Revisionist Studies in the History of Political Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), pp. 107–130. Ball means to rescue Rousseau from his critics, but his own interpretation (the core of which is presented on pp. 125–128) is highly speculative, with not much in the text to support it. There are several problems here, one of which is that Ball takes the “totalitarian” readings of IV.8 too seriously. Another related problem is that he, like other readers, assumes he knows in advance the illiberal character of this teaching, and therefore fails to attend closely enough to the actual text and its complexities. An ambitious interpretation of Rousseau’s civil religion is offered in Patrick J. Deneen, *Democratic Faith* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), chapter 5; but in my view the interpretation is skewed by Deneen’s larger narrative according to which modern theorists like Rousseau seek to displace actual religions by embracing “transformative” secular religions that turn democracy itself into an object of faith. I accept elements of this interpretation. However, as will be clear throughout the argument of Part I, I do not see anything Promethean in Rousseau’s civil religion; on the contrary, I interpret it as the chastening of Rousseau’s civic republicanism.

³ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *On the Social Contract*, ed. Roger D. Masters, trans. Judith R. Masters (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1978), p. 127.