Civil Religion

A Dialogue in the History of Political Philosophy

Civil Religion offers philosophical commentaries on more than twenty thinkers stretching from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries. The book examines four important traditions within the history of modern political philosophy and delves into how each of them addresses the problem of religion. Two of these traditions pursue projects of domesticating religion. The civil-religion tradition, principally defined by Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Rousseau, seeks to domesticate religion by putting it solidly in the service of politics. The liberal tradition pursues an alternative strategy of domestication by seeking to put as much distance as possible between religion and politics. Modern theocracy is a militant reaction against liberalism, and it reverses the relationship of subordination asserted by civil religion: It puts politics directly in the service of religion. Finally, a fourth tradition is defined by Nietzsche and Heidegger. Aspects of their thought are not just modern but hypermodern, yet they manifest an often-hysterical reaction against liberalism that is fundamentally shared with the theocratic tradition. Together, these four traditions compose a vital dialogue that carries us to the heart of political philosophy itself.

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore,
São Paulo, Delhi, Dubai, Tokyo, Mexico City

Cambridge University Press
32 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10013-2473, USA

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521738439

First published 2011

Printed in the United States of America

A catalog record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication data

Beiner, Ronald, 1953–
Civil religion : a dialogue in the history of political philosophy / Ronald Beiner.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-0-521-50636-6 (hardback) – ISBN 978-0-521-73843-9 (pbk.)
1. Political science – History. 2. Political science – Philosophy – History. I. Title.
JA81.B35 2010
320.01 – dc22 2010015173

ISBN 978-0-521-50636-6 Hardback
ISBN 978-0-521-73843-9 Paperback

For Rebecca,
who reads these books quite differently

For it seems to him now that there are but a handful of stories in the world; and if the young are to be forbidden to prey upon the old then they must sit for ever in silence.

– J. M. Coetzee, Nobel Lecture ("He and his man")

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Preface and Acknowledgments

> [T]he style of dialogue and conversation ... carries us, in a manner, into company; and unites the two greatest and purest pleasures of human life, study and society.
>
> – David Hume[1]

> Texts that are inertly of their time stay there: those which brush up unstintingly against historical constraints are the ones we keep with us, generation after generation.
>
> – Edward Said[2]

Great thinkers tend to be full of surprises. Marvelous surprises come to light as political philosophers in the Western tradition confront the political challenge of religion: Machiavelli celebrates St. Francis of Assisi. Hobbes, who places a more radical emphasis upon individual self-preservation than any other thinker, extols the practice of Christian martyrdom. Rousseau, the great champion of republican freedom, praises the politics of Islam. Nietzsche, who is famous for his pronouncement that "God is dead," is, according to the political structure of his argument, an emphatic theist. All of these thinkers, notwithstanding the fact that they have contributed to the radical secularization of modern politics, express not a little sympathy for some manner of theocracy.

The purpose of this book is to present a dialogue in the history of political philosophy. Political philosophy as a form of intellectual activity of course began historically with Socratic–Platonic dialogue. It can be argued that, for it to subsist as a living intellectual activity, political philosophy must continue to be a dialogical enterprise (and indeed, it is hard to imagine how political philosophy could be conceived otherwise). What is of interest to me here is

[1] David Hume, "Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion" in *Writings on Religion*, ed. Anthony Flew (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1992), p. 186.
[2] Edward W. Said, *Freud and the Non-European* (London: Verso, 2003), pp. 26–27.

a dialogue between leading figures in the history of modern political philosophy concerning the relationship between politics and religion. In some cases, interlocutors in this dialogue are consciously aware of other interlocutors; in other cases, I have reconstructed the dialogue *as if* the interlocutors were consciously addressing each other's arguments. I start the dialogue in the middle, as it were, for reasons that are more or less evident. The term "civil religion" (*religion civile*) itself owes its prominence in the history of political philosophy to an immensely powerful thirty-five-paragraph chapter at the end of Rousseau's masterpiece, *Du Contrat Social*. I treat this chapter by Rousseau as the center of gravity of the ambitious set of debates between political philosophers on the topic of religion and politics, and I treat the civil-religion question itself as a gateway to political philosophy as a distinct and uniquely ambitious form of intellectual activity.

To present this study as participating in a continuing dialogue among leading thinkers in the Western tradition is already to take sides in methodological controversies about how to read and interpret the exemplary texts that compose this tradition. For a historicist–contextualist approach to these texts is in principle much less equipped to engage these texts in a directly dialogical way, for the simple reason that if historical context is decisive, then differences of historical context will block the possibility of Platonic-style dialogue *between* the thinkers who concern us, and the same will apply to the possibility of such dialogue between *us* and *them*.[3] To engage the problem of civil religion in a philosophical–dialogical way, one must treat the partners in this conversation (including ourselves) *as if* we were contemporaries living in the same time or living in some space of intellectual exchange beyond time. Perhaps this requires an act of intellectual abstraction, or maybe it requires a deliberately self-imposed historical naïveté, so to speak. Either way, one must believe that there exists some possibility of conducting an intellectual inquiry in a way that transcends differences of historical context to pursue the kind of dialogically motivated political philosophy proposed here.[4]

Richard Tuck gives us quite a sharp articulation of what is at issue between textualism and contextualism when he opens his little book on Hobbes with the following partisan statement on behalf of the contextualist view:

> It is sometimes tempting to think that the heroes of the various histories of philosophy or ethics – men as different as St Thomas Aquinas, Machiavelli, Luther, Hobbes, Kant, or Hegel – were all in some sense engaged on a common enterprise, and would have recognized one another as fellow workers. But a moment's reflection reminds us that it is we who have made a unity of their task: from their own point of view, they belonged

[3] For some reflections in a similar vein, see Jeremy Waldron, *God, Locke, and Equality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), chapter 1.

[4] Leo Strauss has captured the spirit of this enterprise in a characteristically memorable epigram: "The flight to immortality requires an extreme discretion in the selection of one's luggage." See Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 160.

to very different ways of living and had very different tasks to perform. They would have seen themselves as intellectually kin to men who do not figure in these lists – priests or scholars who had on the face of it no great philosophical interest.[5]

We can concede to Tuck that there may be a certain dogmatism in the notion that thinkers of Hobbes's stature are *only* interested in conversing with thinkers of equal stature across the ages. However, there is certainly no less dogmatism in Tuck's assurance that, "from their own point of view," such thinkers are only interested in conversing with their contemporaries. There is no lack of examples in the history of political philosophy of great thinkers who take themselves to be pursuing, among other things, a conversation with philosophers of other centuries (Machiavelli and Livy; Hobbes and Aristotle; Spinoza and Maimonides; Rousseau and Machiavelli; Nietzsche and Plato). The chapters that follow try to highlight some of these transhistorical conversations.[6]

Hobbes actually offers a nice illustration of the interplay of text (universalism) and context (historicism) in the practice of political theory. Hobbes took his principles of civil life to have universal validity, and he presented them as such; therefore one is only being faithful to the nature of Hobbes's enterprise as he understood it insofar as one considers these principles on the plane of universal validity (in competition with alternative theories throughout the history

[5] Richard Tuck, *Hobbes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 1. For a nice encapsulation of the "de-canonizing" (or canon-busting) impulse behind the Cambridge School, see Emile Perreau-Saussine, "Quentin Skinner in Context," *The Review of Politics* 69 (2007), pp. 106–111, particularly the story of the conversation between Peter Laslett and Quentin Skinner related on p. 107.

[6] I do not mean to deny that important insights can be obtained by means of a contextualist–historicist approach, nor is it necessary to deny this. I am simply making clear that in constructing this work as I have, I have embraced a strongly textualist approach to the political philosophy canon. It is quite possible to hold a kind of "dual legitimacy" view according to which both textualist and contextualist approaches can be sources of valuable insights into the relevant texts, notwithstanding their radically different methods of inquiry; that is, each can be an independent source of legitimate insights. J. G. A. Pocock argued along these lines in "The Historian and the Political Theorist," a lecture delivered at a conference on "Citizenship, Conscience and Political Education" on July 31, 2000, in Quebec City – an argument that struck me as quite persuasive. Pocock's suggestion is that "[t]heorist and historian ought not to be in an antagonistic relation, but in one where information and validation can be exchanged." There is considerable magnanimity in this hand of friendship extended by the historian to the theorist, and it is a gesture that the theorist has no reason not to reciprocate (cf., for instance, Waldron, *God, Locke, and Equality*, p. 11). See also Ian Ward, "Helping the Dead Speak: Leo Strauss, Quentin Skinner and the Arts of Interpretation in Political Thought," *Polity*, Vol. 41, Issue 2 (April 2009): 235–255, which argues – convincingly – for a division of labor between historicist and transhistorical approaches to the history of political thought. It should also be made clear that although Tuck is fully committed to a historicist reading of Hobbes, his approach to political theory is *not* through-and-through historicist – for Tuck believes that Hobbes's way of responding to moral skepticism remains importantly relevant to contemporary thinking. So although he privileges a contextualist interpretation over other interpretations, it is important to appreciate that it does not follow from Tuck's view that Hobbes's philosophy speaks only to Hobbes's own contemporaries. I pursue my challenge to Tuck in somewhat greater detail in a forthcoming essay entitled "'Textualism': An Anti-Methodology."

of political philosophy). However, there is no question that Hobbes's articulation of his civil vision was given the specific kind of urgency it had in relation to a crisis of political legitimacy in a particular time and place. It is surely no accident that the key works of Hobbes's political philosophy come to be unfolded between 1640 and 1651, and one should not be indifferent to this context in trying to understand his theoretical purposes. (Hobbes himself properly highlights this context when he writes, in the last paragraph of *Leviathan*, that his "[d]iscourse [was] occasioned by the disorders of the present time.") Many of the thinkers in this book, including Hobbes, wrote passionate responses to their contemporary critics, so they were obviously acutely attuned to the views of their contemporaries; but all of these thinkers were equally committed to philosophical dialogue with their interlocutors throughout the history of political philosophy, and therefore no less attuned to the questions of enduring validity that were at stake in these transhistorical debates. One should not attempt to persuade historians to become philosophers, nor attempt to persuade philosophers to become historians. Each should get on with his or her own job and contribute what they are able to contribute by way of illuminating works of political philosophy. Each of these approaches will be a source of essential insights, and neither should be slighted in favor of the other.

Therefore, although I do not intend to assert an intellectual monopoly for my own side of the debate, it should be clear that the approach adopted in this book is resolutely textualist – self-consciously and unapologetically so. That is, we find ourselves preoccupied with a more or less determinate set of privileged texts, and ask these questions: What's going on in these texts? What discursive games are they playing? What inner tensions and paradoxes do they exemplify? How do these texts engage and challenge *each other* – through implicit and explicit reciprocal dialogue? This last question is especially important, for without mutual dialogue between the texts, one would have manifestations of intellectual activity but not genuine political philosophy in the full sense. Political philosophy is dialogical in its essence, which is why the tradition of philosophical inquiry addressed in this book finds its origin in the dialogical work of Plato.[7] My way of doing political theory in this book is deliberately old-fashioned. In privileging certain texts, I am affirming that there is a canon of great thinkers, and that it is by inserting ourselves into the dialogue between these thinkers that we have the best chance of participating

[7] Much recent political theory has revolved around the axis of "deliberative" political theory versus "agonistic" political theory – that is, politics as dialogue versus politics as struggle. It can be freely conceded that there is an important agonistic dimension to the form of intellectual life that is political philosophy. In my view, the agonal process of political philosophy should be conducted in the spirit of a chess game: Yes, one wants to prevail intellectually over the other, but this does not exclude a form of real dialogue. The agon should be conducted in a way that is friendly, good spirited, and open to learning what the other has to teach. It is never a one-way street, never simply a matter of trouncing an opponent. In short, the agon that is political theory is always also dialogical.

in an aspired-to "conversation of [hu]mankind."[8] The classic articulation of the conception of theory practiced in this book is Machiavelli's description of his conversation with the ancients in his famous letter to Vettori of December 10, 1513,[9] and the chapters that follow presume that a conversation with the moderns (among whom Machiavelli himself is, of course, one of the most preeminent figures) is no less worthy of "regal and courtly garments" than Machiavelli's own conversation with the ancients.

"There are but a handful of stories in the world." That is, the great figures in the political philosophy tradition continually revolve around the same perennial issues and maintain among themselves a perennial mutual dialogue. If that is not a vindication of political philosophy as an intellectual discipline, then I do not know what is. The purpose of this book is to sketch a unified trajectory of philosophical reflection and debate from Machiavelli to John Rawls, via Bayle, Spinoza, Maistre, Tocqueville, and Schmitt. If, on one hand, political philosophy really exists as a coherent intellectual tradition, then it should in principle be possible to define shared problems and common concerns (although different and even radically opposed responses) within this tradition. On the other hand, perhaps the history of political philosophy is, in fact, a pseudo-tradition, offering only the appearance of meaningful dialogue, the reality of which it fails to vindicate. We cannot know which of these two propositions is true without actually gathering together the putative dialogue partners within this tradition and seeing what comes out of their arguments and counterarguments. That is what this book attempts to do.[10]

[8] The phrase was given currency by Oakeshott, but he borrowed it from Hobbes (*Leviathan*, chapter 15).

[9] Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 109–110. Cf. the dream Machiavelli supposedly told on his deathbed according to which he would rather go to hell discussing politics with the likes of Plato, Plutarch, and Tacitus than go to paradise with Christian paupers. The dream is related in Roberto Ridolfi, *The Life of Niccolò Machiavelli*, trans. Cecil Grayson (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963), pp. 249–250. It should be added that Machiavelli's dream of a conversation in hell with Plato and Plutarch is itself a mirroring of Socrates' image of a philosophical conversation in Hades with the heroes and demigods of the past (*Apology* 41a–c). Rousseau's version of this perennial trope is a dialogue between Moses, Lycurgus, Solon, and Numa: See *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*, Vol. 4, ed. Roger D. Masters and Christopher Kelly (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 1994), pp. 34–35. See also Hannah Arendt/Karl Jaspers, *Correspondence 1926–1969*, ed. Lotte Kohler and Hans Saner (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992), p. 317.

[10] In putting together this inquiry in the very old-fashioned way I have, as a transhistorical dialogue about perennial issues concerning human existence, am I presuming that the canon from Plato onward gives us everything we need intellectually to think through our situation in the present? If so, is the presumption actually warranted? In "The Adequacy of the Canon," George Kateb makes a case that is worth considering that in certain essential ways, the canon fails us; Kateb, *Patriotism and Other Mistakes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), pp. 384–407. "The texts usually presume to speak timelessly" (p. 387), but on Kateb's account they do not suffice in enabling us to grasp the political horrors of the twentieth century.

It gives me great pleasure to acknowledge my large debt to cherished colleagues and former colleagues at the University of Toronto, who have taught me so much that helps inform reflection on the history of political philosophy, notably the following people: Edward Andrew, Ryan Balot, Alan Brudner, Joseph Carens, Simone Chambers, Frank Cunningham, Don Forbes, Ken Green, Gad Horowitz, Ryan Hurl, Duncan Ivison, Rebecca Kingston, Peggy Kohn, Nancy Kokaz, Alkis Kontos, Mark Lippincott, Jennifer Nedelsky, Clifford Orwin, Tom Pangle,[11] Melissa Williams, and Irving Zeitlin, as well as my Lockean friend at York University, Steve Newman. My largest debt, however, is to the many theses on topics relevant to this book written by Theory doctoral students in Political Science at the University of Toronto. In most cases, I served on their supervisory committees, but they did most of the teaching. Their theses have been for me a never-ending source of invaluable suggestions about books to read, texts to reread, and problems to ponder. The following is not a comprehensive list, but nonetheless conveys some indication of the scale of my debt: Richard Sigurdson, on Burckhardt and Nietzsche (1991); David Foster, on Locke's *First Treatise* (1991); James Alvey, on Adam Smith (1996); Judd Owen, on Rawls, Rorty, and Fish (1998); Mark Lloyd, on Shaftesbury and Locke (1999); Borys Kowalsky, on J. S. Mill (2000); Jeff Loucks, on Machiavelli and Montesquieu (2000); Simon Kow, on Hobbes and Milton (2001); Joshua Goldstein, on Hegel (2001); Nate McKune, on Carl Schmitt (2001); Daniel Pellerin, on Calvin (2002); Lee MacLean, on Rousseau (2002); Joe Hebert, on Tocqueville (2004); Marc Hanvelt, on Hume (2007); Robert Sparling, on J. G. Hamann (2008); Brent Cusher, on Plato and Rousseau (2009), and Gabriel Bartlett, on Thomas More (in progress). I am also grateful to another former student, Graeme Garrard, for helping to spur my interest in Maistre. Garrard in turn was prompted in this direction by his encounter at Oxford with Isaiah Berlin. Berlin clearly believed that the worst kind of liberal is a complacent liberal, and that the best way to avoid complacency is to engage in an intellectually serious and even intellectually respectful way with radical versions of illiberalism. I trust that this book is in keeping with the spirit of Berlin's liberalism in this regard.

Some chapters of this book draw freely upon work published elsewhere, notably "Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Rousseau on Civil Religion," *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 55, No. 4 (Fall 1993): 617–638; "Civil Religion," in *The Encyclopedia of Democracy*, ed. Seymour Martin Lipset (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Books, 1995), Vol. 3, pp. 1052–1054; "George Grant,

[11] As regards my former colleague, Tom Pangle, my writing of this book clearly represents a tacit admission that with respect to one of the issues that he and I debated in my book, *Philosophy in a Time of Lost Spirit*, he was right and I was wrong: namely the issue concerning whether political philosophers are obliged to take up "the theological–political question." Given the tenacious staying power of religion and of its political claims, "coming to grips with God" turns out to be an ineliminable part of the business of political philosophy.

Nietzsche, and the Problem of a Post-Christian Theism," in *George Grant and the Subversion of Modernity*, ed. Arthur Davis (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), pp. 109–138; and "John Rawls's Genealogy of Liberalism," in *Reflections on Rawls: An Assessment of His Legacy*, ed. Shaun P. Young (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2009), pp. 73–89. Finally, I should not omit to express my gratitude to the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada for research funding throughout the years I have been writing this book. This generous funding from SSHRCC has paid for many things that have helped completion of the book, not the least of which has been Michael Gray's very helpful and efficient work on the index.