

The Theological-Political Problem: An Arendtian Response

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Abstract: The so-called theological-political problem featured heavily in the work of German émigré Leo Strauss, whose accolades such as Thomas Pangle regard this issue as central to their political thinking. By contrast, fellow émigré Hannah Arendt understood the focus on truth seen under a theological lens as potentially fatal to the maintenance of our public political space. The problem is especially acute for the liberal-democratic society, as both Strauss and Arendt were keenly aware, given the lack of constraints on people's freedom to experiment with meaning and reject established truths and traditions. We argue that Straussian accolades are mistaken in their emphasis on religion, and demotion of the political to revealed truth, and that the Arendtian approach to the question of religion and politics better captures the human spirit and sociability.

The Theological-Political Problem: An Arendtian Response

The theological-political problem is the relationship between theology, or an adumbrated notion that is religious in nature, and politics, or thinking about politics; it refers to the relationship between religion and politics. In the twentieth century the theological-political problem occupied the thought of Leo Strauss (1899-1973), a Jewish émigré from Germany.¹ It has also featured large in the work of several prominent Straussians.² Interestingly, it may be that whereas Strauss ultimately comes down on the side of Athens, his accolades in their review and use of his work seem to come down on the side of Jerusalem.³ While the purpose of this paper is not to rescue Strauss from his accolades, it is to cast some skepticism not merely on the Jerusalem side of the debate, but on the value of the theological-political debate itself to political theory. To that end,

¹ Strauss' understanding of the theological-political problem can be found primarily in his 1948 lecture "Reason and Revelation," reprinted in Heinrich Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem*, tr. Marcus Brainard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), and in his well-known 1967 essay "Jerusalem and Athens: Some Introductory Reflections," *Commentary* 43(June, 1967): 45-57. "Reason and Revelation" provides an ingenious and detailed engagement between hypothetical interlocutors representing philosophy and religion, giving their best arguments in response to the other side, putting philosophy to its sharpest test, one that ends in a stalemate. Had either side been refuted, then the truth of the winning side would be thereby established. In Strauss' view, only pre-modern philosophy is up to this test and so it, not modern philosophy with its unbelief in truth, can contend with divine revelation. See Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem*, p. 143.

² See Thomas L. Pangle, *Political Philosophy and the God of Abraham* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), Steven B. Smith, *Reading Leo Strauss: Politics, Philosophy, Judaism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), and Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Problem*.

³ That there is a distinction between Strauss' thinking and that of his followers should always be kept in mind. Recently, Anne Norton has written a book-length treatment of, among other things, Strauss' followers who are active in government; see her *Leo Strauss and the Politics of Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004). That work was reviewed negatively, and Strauss and the Straussians defended, in David Lewis Schaefer, "Careless Reading," *Review of Politics* 67, no. 3(Summer 2005): 589-592. Earlier this year a more balanced and also more penetrating and critical treatment of Strauss and his accolades was published. See Nicholas Xenos, *Cloaked in Virtue: Unveiling Leo Strauss and the Rhetoric of American Foreign Policy* (New York: Routledge, 2008). Interestingly, the Straussian Smith questions whether Strauss himself would have supported contemporary American interventionism abroad, as many influential Straussians do. This prompts Smith to ask whether Strauss would not distance himself from some of today's Straussians. See Smith, *Reading Leo Strauss: Politics, Philosophy, Judaism*, pp. 200-201.

and for comparative purposes, we will present the thinking on religion and politics by another Jewish émigré from Germany, Hannah Arendt (1906-1975).⁴

It may bear mentioning that the ‘Jerusalem v. Athens’ discussion central to understanding the so-called theological-political problem is *not* the same ‘Jerusalem v. Athens’ discussion prominent in some biblical exegeses that seek to identify and separate out aspects of Hellenism, particularly its philosophy and religious understandings, from the Hebraic and early Christian traditions.⁵ This other, more strictly theological discussion is occasioned by two contexts. First, the context of Jesus of Nazareth being Jewish, living in a culturally Hellenistic society, at least to a noticeable degree, and in a land under Roman authority, and, secondly, the apostle Paul being Jewish, yet an early and authoritative evangelical Christian, preaching and converting gentiles in Greek territories. It may also bear mentioning that the Jerusalem counterpoised to Athens in the context of identifying the pillars of western civilization may be a Christian invention, or it may be some blend of Jewish and Christian understanding. Regardless of which sort of Jerusalem a thinker has in mind, one important connection between it and Athens is the concept of law, of regulation by law, whether God’s law as revealed in the Old Testament (or biblical law as understood in the light of Christian teaching) and apprehended through the gift of faith, or the impersonal law of nature as apprehended through human reason alone, Platonic law. Another important connection is that both Jerusalem and Athens can be used to constitute a people.

While Strauss and Arendt got acquainted with one another back in Germany, neither retained contact with the other.⁶ One sharp difference in terms of the intellectual

⁴ Arendt’s understanding of the relationship between religion and politics can be found primarily in her 1953 essay “Religion and Politics,” reprinted in Jerome Kohn’s compilation Hannah Arendt, *Essays in Understanding 1930-1954: Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1994). Also see her related 1967 essay, “Truth and Politics,” reprinted in Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Penguin Books, 1987).

⁵ E.g., see Marvin R. Wilson, *Our Father Abraham: Jewish Roots of the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdsman, and Dayton Center for Judaic-Christian Studies, 1989), pp. 5-9, where the author opines that “some scholars have displayed a tendency to overemphasize the opposition between Athens and Jerusalem.”

⁶ Two works connecting Strauss and Arendt will be consulted: Peter Graf Kielmansegg, Horst Mewes, and Elisabeth Glaser-Schmidt, ed.s, *Hannah Arendt and Leo Strauss: German Emigrés and American Political Thought after World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, and German Historical Institute, Washington, D.C., 1997[paperback edition]), and Grant Havers, “Between Athens and Jerusalem: Western

history of their achievements is that Strauss is considered to have founded a school of thought with an identifiable following – the Straussians – whereas Arendt did neither, though several of her former students have become prominent political theorists.⁷ Both Strauss and Arendt viewed the United States as a bulwark against totalitarianism, with the former less sanguine about American prospects due to its political understanding being overly grounded in modern thought, which he disdained.⁸ Indeed, Strauss believed that biblical faith and classical philosophy had more in common with each other than either with modern thought that would presume to synthesize the two: “the quarrel between the ancients and the moderns seems to us to be more fundamental than either the quarrel between Plato and Aristotle or that between Kant and Hegel.”⁹

Both Strauss and Arendt looked to ancient Greek political philosophy for inspiration, to identify what is distinctive about the political, and to uncover politics’ original grounds and assess its relevance for the twentieth century. Strauss’ reflections on religion tended to focus attention on his Jewish heritage, whereas Arendt focused as much, if not more of her reflections on religion on Christianity, than on her ethnic Jewish heritage.¹⁰ Arendt valorized what she regarded as Christian contributions to the understanding of politics, chief among them being the concepts of the promise and forgiveness, which makes a new beginning possible as well as the focus on natality, rather than mortality. The focus on new beginnings, rather than death or the avoidance of death, has been regarded as a feminist trait in Arendt, whereas Strauss and his followers,

Otherness in the Thought of Leo Strauss and Hannah Arendt,” *The European Legacy* 9, no. 1(February, 2004): 19-29.

⁷ Norton, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of Empire*, presents the Straussian cult as a fraternal, male-oriented society, at least those Straussians who are students of one of Strauss’ best students, Allan Bloom. Xenos, *Cloaked in Virtue*, pp. 9-10, identifies Allan Bloom, Harry V. Jaffa, and Joseph Cropsey as the “big three” Straussians.

⁸ E.g., see the essays “On the Basis of Hobbes’ Political Philosophy” and “Locke’s Doctrine of Natural Law” in Leo Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy? And Other Studies* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1959).

⁹ See Strauss, “Jerusalem and Athens,” p. 55.

¹⁰ Arendt was famously criticized, and also defended in connection with her portrayal of the behavior of German Jews leading up to, and during the Nazi regime, a portrayal occasioned by her reporting the trial of Adolf Eichmann, published as *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Viking Press, 1963).

to this writer's knowledge, have been regarded entirely as masculinist writers who valorize patriarchy.¹¹ Death as an evil is a theme in Strauss' "Jerusalem and Athens", an evil mankind deserves for its inherently sinful state, from which only God's grace redeems him. This, of course, leads to a certain reverence in Strauss for religion insofar as it offers an explanation for evil, death, and the nature of man, and also a provision for redemption, which become aspects that a political philosophy must acknowledge, even if it may not be about such things. Arendt, by contrast, relegates religion to the realm of the private, and is far less sure of its salutary role in political thought; her deliberations on natality de-prioritize a focus of attention on death and the avoidance of death.¹²

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This paper is part of a larger project that seeks to salvage liberal political theory from those of its detractors whose arguments are based in one way or another in religion.¹³ Hence, the current *and preliminary* inquiry into the theological-political problem for reason of the presumed centrality of this debate, regardless of whichever side is in any sense 'right', to the wider 'liberalism is not conciliatory enough to religion' discussion to which my larger work will contribute. The political thinker Leo Strauss is associated with the theological-political problem, and not a few Straussians are keen to base their political theory on traditional religious beliefs. Hence, the next section of this paper is an examination of Strauss' take on the theological-political problem, where I argue that regardless of whether Strauss comes down on the divine revelation or political

¹¹ Pangle, *Political Philosophy and the God of Abraham*, opens his concluding chapter with an explicit acknowledgement of patriarchy and patriarchal families, that he later moderates by indicating that human community ought to be a fraternal society that regards itself as under the patriarchal King of Kings. Earlier in the work Pangle attempts to rehabilitate Sir Robert Filmer and his defense of patriarchy, which John Locke is regarded as having demolished. Both Pangle and Filmer anchor their accounts of ideal human community in the biblical accounts of Adam and Abraham.

¹² Interestingly, both Strauss and Arendt were critical of the political philosophy expounded by Thomas Hobbes, with its famous orientation to the avoidance of death, especially a violent death at the hands of another such as in the context of disorder such as the state of nature or a civil war.

¹³ I refer here to my *Religious Rivals to American Freedoms*, manuscript proposal contracted for Lexington Books/Rowman & Littlefield, contracted in January, 2007, in its own way a continuation of my earlier work, *Liberal Constitutionalism, Marriage, and Sexual Orientation: A Contemporary Case for DisEstablishment*. (NY: Peter Lang, 2002).

philosophy side of the debate, he holds it as crucial to any viable political philosophy that it grapple with this debate and that thinking about politics requires one to take one's bearings from it. This section is followed by a review of Hannah Arendt's thought on the matter of religion and politics, offered as an alternative to Strauss and the Straussians. Arendtian thought is respectful of traditional religion and classical political philosophy; however, as we argue, Arendt does not argue the centrality of religion (or, debate about religion) to political thought, and offers an alternative narrative in which to locate both religion and politics, one not relying on 'Truth' of any kind. Thereafter, some concluding remarks.

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Strauss's lecture "Reason and Revelation" and essay "Jerusalem and Athens: Some Introductory Reflections" articulate well his basic position that there is a difference between the two (reason, or Athens, and divine revelation, or Jerusalem), that they are in conflict and unamenable to synthesis, that their co-existence and quasi-reconciliation or balance is at the heart of western civilization, and that, possibly, the revelation side of the ledger precedes the reason side and sets the terms of the dialogue between them. Strauss holds the theological-political problem in high regard:

All the hopes that we entertain in the midst of the confusion and dangers of the present are founded, positively or negatively, directly or indirectly, on the experiences of the past. Of these experiences, the broadest and deepest – so far as Western man is concerned – are indicated by the names of two cities: Jerusalem and Athens. Western man is what he is, through the coming together of biblical faith and Greek thought.¹⁴

This understanding of Strauss' thought is clearly reflected in Pangle's *Political Philosophy and the God of Abraham*. Meier's *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem* situates Strauss' theology as parallel to his adumbrations of the nature of philosophy and the political, and that the didactic theological-political problem was the

¹⁴ See Strauss, "Jerusalem and Athens," p. 45.

central theme of his work.¹⁵ Neither work, however, suggests anything but that a chief concern of Strauss was absolute truth, that the philosopher stood closest to it, and that Strauss' was a serious engagement with Jewish tradition, reflecting a deep understanding of the Torah, a respectful if not reverential stance towards it, not a contemptuous one.

Strauss' issue with modern political philosophy was that it presumed to overthrow both Jerusalem and Athens, in that, he believed, it sought to legitimate political authority on a basis other than truth, whether the truth be acquired through human reason or 'Truth' known through faith. In doing so the moderns, as Strauss sees them, arrogated not merely to deign to use reason *de novo*, but to use it to pursue knowledge without intending to arrive at a transcendental understanding.¹⁶ In addition, modern political philosophy invented for itself concepts that already had a distinguished pedigree and a station in western civilization. On Strauss' take, Nietzsche saw the futility of the modern, rationalist approach, and the nihilism being made manifest in it, for which Strauss may have admired him for his courage, though his contribution to the storyline of western civilization was to tantalize and animate the vulgar by the prospect of nihilism, and to inspire unsavory political actors to realize this nihilism politically through perversion of even mundane, but widely-held understandings of political values and virtues.

Meier relies on Strauss' previously unpublished 1948 lecture "Reason and Revelation" to argue that for Strauss the two ideals and lives lead in obedience to them are mutually incompatible, irrefutable responses to a pre-social human need. Though non-philosophers have warrant to believe in revelation, while philosophers do not, they must see to it that society is so organized as to accommodate their quest for truth even as it relies on and promulgates mythical-theological answers to satisfy the multitude's need

¹⁵ See Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem*, p. 3. One review of the work states approvingly that Meier's position is that the theologico-political problem "is not just one theme among many in Strauss's oeuvre, nor even the main theme, but the only one" and that this theme "subsumes all others." See Martin D. Yaffe, "Leo Strauss and the Theological Dimension of Political Philosophy: Four Readings," *Review of Politics* 69, no. 4(Fall 2007): 659, 660. Whether Meier is in fact correct in his assessment of Strauss, or whether the focus on the theologico-political problem was an outcome that may have come to dominate Strauss' overall project, if there is one project and/or one theme, is beyond the purview of the present essay. Suffice it to say that at least in 1964/65, mid-career, Strauss wrote that the "theologico-political problem has since remained *the* theme of my studies." Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem*, p. 4 (emphasis original).

¹⁶ The debate over whether Strauss' is a teleological vision is beyond the present essay, though that would seem true, however vague in substance.

for truth and dampen their negative tendencies – chiefly, of course, to disparage and persecute philosophers. This instrumental use of modern political philosophy – to secure philosophers’ existential basis – apparently was not beneath Strauss, though he doubted modern society could do so for long for reason of its vulnerabilities to mass movements and interest-based group politics.¹⁷

At the end of the day, the theological-political problem is one that Strauss allows only philosophers to engage in, because only they can, or dare to comprehend the stalemate represented by these two views and how to manage it and the masses so that philosophy can rule our politics, though lesser minds may not realize that. Meier argues that Strauss’ central idea regarding the relationship between philosophy and political philosophy is that philosophy, in order to justify itself, must take on its most serious contender (divine revelation), and that, in order for it to continue to engage in that cosmic contest, it needs must be protected and so must entail a political philosophy that identifies the political regime so ordered to ensure that the right men can carry on this contest.¹⁸ Hence, the Jerusalem side is political, perhaps the most significant political issue for political thought, challenging political philosophy existentially to meet it. While he perhaps ought to have admired the moderns for their use of human reason, he clearly believed that they went astray by abdicating the classical quest for truth and goodness, becoming indifferent to it, and settling instead for reasoned conclusions about the political that were sufficient and accessible for their purposes, rather than deriving them from an unchallengeable truth or its pursuit. That the moderns also relegated faith to opinion if not superstition sealed his conviction that they were not only intellectually foolish, but also impious and so the society based on their approach could not last and may even prove threatening to those who do pursue the truth and live the life of reason.

¹⁷ E.g., in his lecture “Reason and Revelation” Strauss makes his point about philosophy’s relationship to society with nods to his famous notion of esoteric writing and belief in the superiority of the philosophic life to the political life:

Still the philosopher has to meet the legitimate claims of society or to shoulder his own responsibility as a citizen. He does this by refraining from publicly teaching what he considers *the* truth in so far as the truth could become dangerous to society. He hides his true teaching behind a socially useful exoteric teaching.

See Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem*, p. 146, emphasis original.

¹⁸ Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem*, pp. 22-28 and 98-103.

That this society came to be democratic and to understand key political concepts such as equality and liberty through democratic lens was ruinous, as he believed the rise of fascism and totalitarianism demonstrated.

Strauss' view is that philosophy cannot disprove the possibility of miracles, and that faith in their possibility, or reputed existence, that there were persons who had experiential knowledge of them and that they were actual things that happened, is the faith prior to faith in divine revelation, rendering revelation immune to reason even if every theology were disproved.¹⁹ Now, in these assertions there is a bias, a bias for revealed religion as maintained in the Hebraic tradition, because of the anchor provided by miracles. But, would Strauss' argument be sustainable if all he was able to do was to demonstrate the irrefutability of faith *simpliciter*, rather than faith understood to mean the Jewish dispensation?²⁰ After all, what else but an *a priori* predilection or commitment belief in the believability of one religious tradition's key faith tenets warrants erecting biblical revelation as *the* opponent to reason?²¹ If Strauss is correct in that faith and reason are irrefutable opponents, and if it is true that his notion of faith were to admit its culturally relativism, then on the one side we have several options because several faiths would be arrayed not only against philosophy, but also against each other, while on the other side we would have public reason deploying the strengths and weaknesses of different faith conceptions of truth against each other, and also against any mad notion

¹⁹ The assertions in this sentence are taken from Strauss' lecture "Reason and Revelation," in Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem*, pp. 153, 155, 157, 161.

²⁰ Note that Pangle, *Political Philosophy and the God of Abraham*, seeks to establish the pertinence of this tradition to the illumination of political philosophy, that it is the former casting light on the latter and demarcating its parameters such that the attempts by Hobbes, Spinoza, and Locke to "make the Scriptures appear to conform to, and to support, their revolutionary, secularizing project of 'enlightenment' " is "impishly ironic." See Pangle, *Political Philosophy and the God of Abraham*, p. 10. For Pangle as for Strauss, modern political philosophy's cardinal error is to assume that it has an intelligible, coherent project absent a contestation with political theology. Smith, *Reading Leo Strauss: Politics, Philosophy, Judaism*, is another Straussian for whom Jerusalem is prior to Athens, because the "belief that God or the gods are in some sense 'first for us' and that consequently the city is subordinate to a divine or revealed legislation constitutes the original form of the political self-understanding" and because of "the necessity of religion for the maintenance of a sound or decent political order." See Smith, *Reading Leo Strauss: Politics, Philosophy, Judaism*, p. 126.

²¹ E.g., Strauss asserts: "Philosophy and Bible agree as to this: *the* alternatives are philosophy or divine revelation." See "Reason and Revelation," in Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem*, p. 170. Some commentators have conjectured that Strauss, no less than Arendt, had a 'Jewish problem,' that he too wrestled with squaring his ethnic heritage to his intellectual leanings.

rooted in faith, then Strauss should have landed on the side of philosophy, given the relativized nature of ‘Truth’ as per faith.

For Strauss, philosophy’s true project is not to refute the possibility of divine revelation, for only in the dynamic of this dialectical argument over truth is it likely that the best way to live will become apparent. This understanding of religion is characteristic of classical political philosophy, which is why Strauss believes that it, and not the modern thinkers, holds the key to saving philosophy in its purity, and those who so philosophize, in today’s world.²² Strauss holds modern political philosophy in contempt because it is unconcerned with this project, because it believes it can refute faith.²³ Naturally, this bias lends support to those commentators who believe that Strauss privileged religion over reason, and so came to make a value judgment – a decidedly negative one – on modern thought, where merely an intellectual judgment would suffice.

While an interesting storyline, whether Strauss ultimately believed that the ‘Truth’ of faith or the truth of philosophy was in fact what the partisans to either side held it to be, is not as relevant as that he regarded truth in a monistic way, that it must be one, absolute, and universal – the ‘whole,’ in Strauss’ parlance, that genuine philosophers must seek. To the extent that he was biased in favor of the Jerusalem side of the theological-political problem, subordinating true political philosophy to divine revelation even if they are co-equal in terms of their capacity to refute one another, then the difficulty he presents for reasoned inquiry is all the more pointed, yet its thrust is blunted if one does not hold the divine revelation he subscribes to as universally true in the face of other faith traditions, or if one does not see it as relevant, necessary prior work to get hold of the theological-political problem before one philosophizes, attempts to design political regimes for the world’s peoples, or advise a diverse citizenry as to how to live and live together. *Malagre lui*, Strauss’ deep-seated anti-Enlightenment sensibility and attachment to the reality of the theological-political problem do not release human reason to pursue the good, but would straitjacket the multitude to the philosophical predilections

²² Smith asserts that Strauss is no enemy of liberal-democracy, but merely the enemy of modern thinkers because, were we to rely on them or secular reason alone, we would not be able to ground liberalism, to have confidence in it, or to save it so that genuine philosophers such as Strauss could continue to flourish under the protection of its rights. See Smith, *Reading Leo Strauss: Politics, Philosophy, Judaism*, p. 187.

²³ See “Reason and Revelation,” in Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem*, p. 177.

of the few whose anti-worldly stance threatens to destroy the security of our public space and the pluralism that resides there.

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Hannah Arendt, in a word, preferred plurality to monism, and was extremely wary of the intrusion of ‘the Good’ and notions of ‘Truth’ into the political realm, fearing that they have the capacity to destroy politics and, shy of that, corrupt human achievement through politics and political thought, and divert them from their potential. It is not that Arendt would belittle Strauss’ love for truth, but that she would displace such a personal quest in favor of a different motivation, love of the world, in the public realm, her safeguard for both religion and political philosophy. In her essay “Religion and Politics” she takes issue with treating communism as a religion or as a false religion, displacing the true one, and with regarding that as its worst trait:

Communism, in fact, carefully avoids being mistaken for a religion. When the Catholic Church recently decided to excommunicate Communists...no corresponding move occurred from the side of the Communists. To be sure, from the point of view of a Christian this is a religious fight, just as for a philosopher it is a fight for philosophy. For Communism, however, it is nothing of the sort. It is the fight against a world in which all these things, free religion, free philosophy, free art, etc., are possible at all.²⁴

Naturally, given that God is understood to be absolute truth and goodness, Arendt’s wariness of these notions, especially when absolutized in metaphysical speculation or ontologically in the being of God leads to her skepticism of religion as an aid to politics, as appropriately admixed in the public realm.

There can be no doubt as to the centrality of plurality to the human condition for Arendt, as this excerpt from her seminal work makes clear:

Action, the only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter, corresponds to the human condition of plurality, to the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world. While all aspects of the human condition are somehow related to politics, this plurality is specifically *the condition* – not only the *condition sine qua non*, but the *condition per quam* – of all political life. Thus the language of the Romans, perhaps the

²⁴ See Arendt, “Religion and Politics,” p. 374.

most political people we have known, used the words “to live” and “to be among men” (*inter hominess esse*) or “to die” and “to cease to be among men” (*inter hominess esse desinere*) as synonyms.... Plurality is the condition of human action because we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live.²⁵

The passages just quoted also indicate the importance Arendt assigned to the Roman practice and understanding of politics.²⁶ The reason Arendt valorizes Rome is for its valuing of the active political life, whereas Athens, understood to mean the classical philosophers Plato and Aristotle, valorized the contemplative life for the few, with politics coming off as a poor second choice forced by the necessity of managing the many, lest philosophy fall into peril at the hands of the mob. Rome offered not a model of democracy, but of politics the essential elements of which Arendt wished to recapture for contemporary American political activism (such as the student protest movements of the 1960s, which she admired though wished to enhance), and believed that the American Founders had got right in both word and deed.

Arendt, then, is a friend to participatory democracy, which is to say something different than that she is a friend to liberalism.²⁷ Arendt, like Strauss, never indicated

²⁵ See Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), pp.7-8.

²⁶ Havers, “Between Athens and Jerusalem,” pp. 24-25, argues that for Arendt Rome symbolizes and/or is the “synthesis” of Athens and Jerusalem, and so under the authority of Rome the three form a trinity, which she labels the “Roman trinity,” Christianity is subordinated to Athens and its inherent inclination towards otherworldliness is held in check. She also suggests that this trinity “is especially threatened by the modern separation of church and state,” apparently not recognizing that any suggestion that church and state not be separated would be rejected by Arendt in short order. Arendt did not reject secularism, but found it an appropriate, but misunderstood basis for politics in the public space:

Secularism, to begin with, has a political as well as a spiritual meaning and the two are not necessarily the same. Politically, secularism means no more than that religious creeds and institutions have no publicly binding authority and that, conversely, political life has no religious sanction. This brings up the grave question of the source of authority of our traditional “values,” of our laws and customs and standards for judgment, which for so many centuries had been sanctified by religion. But the long alliance between religion and authority does not necessarily prove that the concept of authority is itself of a religious nature. On the contrary, I think it much more likely that authority, insofar as it is based on tradition, is of Roman political origin and was monopolized by the Church only when it became the political as well as spiritual heir of the Roman Empire. No doubt one of the chief characteristics of our present crisis is the breakdown of all authority and the broken thread of our tradition, but from this it does not follow that the crisis is primarily religious or has a religious origin.

See Arendt, “Religion and Politics,” p. 372.

²⁷ George Kateb argues that “Arendt may be the more serious enemy of modern democracy,” but that she “reproaches modern democracy because it is not participatory.” See his essay “The Questionable Influence

publicly whether she was a liberal or a conservative in political leanings, a democrat or a republican in political party, though in terms of commitment to the ideals of liberalism and the American constitutional order, Arendt was clearly a supporter, and Strauss a detractor, principally owing to his disdain for the modern notion of equality.²⁸ At any rate, Arendt saw politics as an activity between different people coming together out of a common concern for the public space in which they appear (initiated by their being born) and from which they disappear (finally through death). In this activity and in this space no-one has a priority of place because they claim to possess something that any of them regard, or must regard as true, or as the ‘Truth,’ whether secular or religious.

Hence, Havers is mistaken in her assessment of Arendt, that her commitment to democracy is compromised by a denigration of the Bible and its prioritizing of the relationship between God and man. Arendt does not denigrate the Bible in order to critique democracy, because she does not critique democracy in those terms nor does she refuse to recognize the Biblical contributions to the western tradition. What she, Arendt, will not do is require “all human beings – rulers and ruled – to live under one truth, one morality, and one justice,” as Havers would have it.²⁹ This should not be taken to mean, however, that Arendt rejects for herself or for anyone else the possibility of, or belief in one truth, and that the traditional western religious view is overall the right one. She simply refuses to attach political significance to this personal or social view, that it should determine the political. In fact, on Arendt’s take, ‘Truth’ most likely enters the political arena in a most dangerous way:

Seen from the viewpoint of politics, truth has a despotic character. It is therefore hated by tyrants, who rightly fear the competition of a coercive force they cannot monopolize, and it enjoys a rather precarious status in the eyes of governments that rest on consent and abhor coercion. Facts are beyond agreement and consent.... The trouble is that factual truth, like all other truth, peremptorily

of Arendt (and Strauss)” in Kielmansegg, Mewes, and Glaser-Schmidt, ed.s, *Hannah Arendt and Leo Strauss*, pp. 29, 30. Arendt preferred a robust citizenry and believed that democratic institutions made that possible, and made it possible for citizens to realize the public happiness of the ancients. Arendt was not keen on representative democracy, which is what Kateb is referring to in the remark, above, that she is an enemy of democracy.

²⁸ There is good reason, however, to suggest that Strauss was a political conservative, though less reason to suggest that Arendt was a political liberal.

²⁹ See Havers, “Between Athens and Jerusalem,” p. 28.

claims to be acknowledged and precludes debate, and debate constitutes the very essence of political life. The modes of thought and communication that deal with truth, if seen from the political perspective, are necessarily domineering...³⁰

Arendt's thought is here distinct from Augustine's, about whom she wrote her dissertation, and more on the order of Dante's, indicating that even within the same religious tradition, there is a tendentious pluralism, tendentious because it can always be overcome through violence (whether physical or through orthodoxy) employed to establish one reigning point-of-view, eliminating the rest from the public space.³¹

This notion of eliminating alternatives to one mode of thought or idea can also occur within the mind of the individual, preventable, according to Arendt, through earnest dialogue with oneself, the sort of dialogue between I and myself modeled by Socrates. Needless to say, even here, at the level of the individual, the notion of an absolute truth or uncontestable proposition, whether religious or not, is troublesome. This places Arendt in the company of John Stuart Mill, an unqualified liberal political philosopher, given his argument in "On Liberty" for freedom of thought and expression with respect to the vitality of ideas remaining a vibrant part of a person's or a community's life provided they are constantly engaged with and willingly, genuinely subject to being disproved or otherwise being shown faulty.

Hence, without refuting the truth or falsity of any proposition or belief, Arendt placed this issue – the core of the theological-political problem – on ice by relegating it entirely to the realm of the private, the space of the social, not the public political space.

³⁰ See Arendt, "Truth and Politics," p. 241.

³¹ Arendt was very wary of the potential of any deployment of ideology to lead to violence, destroying both the ideology (whether secular or religious) and likely the public space as well:

Modern history has shown time and again that alliances between "throne and altar" can only discredit both. But while in the past the danger chiefly consisted of using religion as a mere pretext, thus investing political action as well as religious belief with the suspicion of hypocrisy, the danger today is infinitely greater. Confronted with a full-fledged ideology, our greatest danger is to counter it with an ideology of our own. If we try to inspire public-political life once more with "religious passion" or to use religion as a means of political distinctions, the result may very well be the transformation and perversion of religion into an ideology and the corruption of our fight against totalitarianism by a fanaticism which is utterly alien to the very essence of freedom.

See Arendt, "Religion and Politics," p. 384.

And for Arendt, this move to deprivilege and relegate applies with equal force to secular, more philosophical notions of truth that would reduce the pluralism inherent in the human condition: “The shift from rational truth to opinion implies a shift from man in the singular to men in the plural.... One can understand that the philosopher, in his isolation, yields to the temptation to use his truth as a standard to be imposed upon human affairs...”³² Arendt’s move here can be seen as denigrating religion only for those persons interested in basing politics on religion, a sort of political regime opposed by non-believers and many believers alike.

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By way of concluding remarks, we would argue that in the context of pluralism as appropriated through human reason, Straussian accolades are mistaken in their emphasis on religion, and demotion of the political to revealed truth, and that the Arendtian approach to the question of religion and politics better captures the human spirit and sociability. The Arendtian response to the theological-political problem is to deny it any stature in determining our public politics. Strauss’ elitist elevation of the theological-political problem is not only profoundly undemocratic, it is also unnecessary and potentially destructive, however a friend to classical, absolutist aristocracy.³³ On Arendt’s take, the focus on ‘Truth’ or transcendental philosophical truth severs our human condition from its only roots in this world, thereby making most anything possible in this world because it will then be seen in the light of another.³⁴ To insist on the pre-

³² See Arendt, “Truth and Politics,” pp. 235, 237.

³³ E.g., see Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), pp. 140-141, where Strauss argues for absolute rule by the wise who “ought not to be responsible to their unwise subjects” as they direct the community towards man’s full perfection.

³⁴ Arendt contrasts the truth of the philosophers from politics, and points to the latter’s independent value for philosophic thought that traditionally denigrated the practice of politics:

Contemporary political thought, though it cannot compete in articulateness with the past, distinguishes itself from this traditional background in that it recognizes that human affairs pose authentic philosophic problems and that politics is a domain in which genuine philosophic questions arise, and not merely a sphere of life which ought to be ruled by precepts that owe their origin to altogether different experiences.... The ancient and the Christian solution had been to consider this whole realm as essentially instrumental, as existing only for the sake of something else.... The subordination is justified in traditional terms – as the inherent superiority of ends over means, the eternal over the temporal.

eminence of this dyad, Jerusalem *v.* Athens, as fundamental, preliminary to crafting a just regime, is to endanger, not save the political.

See "Concern with Politics in Recent European Philosophical Thought," in Hannah Arendt, *Essays in Understanding 1930-1954*, pp. 429-430, 430, 434.