Living the Theologico-Political Problem: On Ernest Fortin's Essays

The Birth of Philosophic Christianity: Studies in Early Christian and Medieval Thought. By Ernest L. Fortin, with Foreword by Author. Edited by J. Brian Benestad. Vol. I (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996). BPC

Classical Christianity and the Political Order: Reflections on the Theologico-Political Problem. By Ernest L. Fortin. Edited by J. Brian Benestad. Foreword by Daniel J. Mahoney. Vol. II (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, *1996).* CCPO

Human Rights, Virtue, and the Common Good: Untimely Meditations on Religion and Politics. By Ernest L. Fortin. Edited with Foreword by J. Brian Benestad. Vol. III (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996). HRVCG

As the more than eleven-hundred pages that comprise *Ernest Fortin: Collected Essays* attest, for the past forty years Ernest Fortin has not shied away from offering his thoughts on matters concerning philosophy, religion, and politics.' The three-volume collection brings together sixty-three articles and fifteen book reviews, the majority of which have appeared previously in various scholarly journals and periodicals. Nevertheless if the differing accounts that have been given about the character and content of Fortin's writings over the years are any indication, a substantial body of scholarly work is no guarantee that what one has to say about these matters will be readily and uniformly understood. Through the years, Fortin's writings have elicited a wide variety of responses: appreciation, mockery, bewilderment, suspicion, disinterest, sympathy, and respect. To some the man who comes to light in these

writings is a culturally conservative political scientist, to others an insufficiently moralistic moral theologian; to some a staunch defender of Christian orthodoxy, to others a clever Latin Averroist; to some a reactionary partisan of a lost classical or medieval order, and, to others still, an ironic practitioner of postmodern nihilism.' Fortin, in other words, seems capable of being interpreted as nearly anything by almost anyone.

The apparent confusion that surrounds what Fortin thinks may in some respects be the result of the distinctive character of his writings. To begin with, what one immediately notices about his works is that they fail, both individually and collectively, to fall neatly within the parameters of a specific discipline or field of study in the contemporary academy. Granted some of his writings appear more theological than philosophical in character and *vice versa.* For example, at first glance an essay that examines the work of a Church Father would seem to belong to the province of theology, whereas one that investigates the theoretical origins of modern natural rights doctrines would seem to be animated by political or philosophic concerns. More often than not, however, Fortin's reader discovers that even these kinds of general observations turn out to be somewhat questionable: much of an essay on St. Basil is devoted to a deep reflection on the teaching of Xenophon's *Memorabilia;* on the other hand, an essay on the theoretical underpinnings of "natural rights" takes pains to show that early modern natural rights doctrines are in tension with the account of human life given in the Bible and by Christian theology. The contemporary reader, who is accustomed to writings that clearly advance the "viewpoint" of a particular discipline, therefore may become frustrated or confused, or possibly both, by what he believes to be a failure on Fortin's part to make clear exactly what kind of investigation is taking place in his works. This is a rather ironic fate for a writer who, as we shall see, never tires of pointing out that a world of difference ultimately separates theological from philosophical reflection.

Perhaps a second, not wholly unrelated, reason for the widely differing accounts of Fortin's thought is that the nondogmatic tone that marks his writings tends to invite conflicting interpretations.

Fortin does not advance or defend any particular parti pris, but rather he attempts to shed greater light on the various ends that animate human life. His works do not directly argue for the absolute superiority of one specific set of ends; on the contrary, they present dialectical investigations designed to discover how and why various "ways of life" differ from one another. Fortin's writings characteristically force the reader to uproot prejudices whose soundness he previously may not have questioned and thus lead him to reexamine these convictions in the bright light of day to see if they are worth replanting. Such a manner of reflection is not born out of a narrowly conceived sociological interest, but from a keen awareness that only this kind of reflection allows one to glimpse something of the full range of human excellence. Stated differently, Fortin's works reveal the thought of a man who takes the aim of a truly liberal education seriously. Fortin accordingly confronts readers first and foremost not as a theologian nor as a philosopher, but as a champion of genuine thoughtfulness, *i.e.*, as someone who does not simply accept the regnant answers to the most important questions-not because such answers are easy to find, but because he is aware that there are other possible responses than those currently in the ascendant.

The concern with gaining greater clarity about the ends that characterize human life requires Fortin to cast a fairly wide net in his writings. For in order to do justice to the variety of claims made on behalf of different ways of life, one must pay close attention to the social and political character of human life. This partially explains the essential role of political philosophy in Fortin's work. In his writings political philosophy is accorded a place of prominence that is more akin to the classical thinkers' understanding of human life than to the prevailing approaches of modern academic disciplines. Fortin emphasizes the necessity and primacy of political philosophy precisely because he recognizes the science's indispensability in human affairs. "By situating itself within the context of human life as a whole," Fortin observes,

> [political philosophy] discloses the full range of human possibilities and thus reveals human beings to themselves as no

> other science is capable of doing. In it, philosophy, politics, and theology come together to thresh out all of the fundamental problems of human life(BPC,)(iv).

The science of political philosophy accordingly provides an unparalleled stage on which all of the fundamental alternatives and enduring human problems can be examined. As a result, the different ways of life that characterize human life are given an audience in which they can be viewed both as they appear to the men who live them as well as how they are simply. In this respect political philosophy serves to hold up a mirror in which man is capable of seeing himself and the world he inhabits in a light whose brightness normally eludes him.

Despite this classical emphasis on the centrality of political philosophy, the science initially takes on a distinctively "modern" form in Fortin's writings. At a time when all thought, including that of the present, is widely believed to be conditioned by its historical context, any expression of human reason is automatically assumed to be a reflection of its time and circumstances. This prevailing school of thought, whose intellectual roots can be traced back to Nietzsche and his great student Heideggar, asserts that no alleged "insight" is true in and of itself, but rather that truths are merely held to be true by particular groups at particular moments. As a consequence, there are no such things as universal and permanent problems and, hence, no equally universal and permanent ways of thinking about such problems. All books or writings, in other words, are mere "histories."

At first glance, Fortin's "historical studies" appear perhaps less concerned with arriving at a better understanding of the "full range of human possibilities" than they do with recording what St. Augustine believed to be the nature of justice or what Dante took to be the best political order for his times. But such an appreciation captures only a limited part of what actually occurs in these writings. To be sure, his historical studies are genuinely historical insofar as they represent serious efforts to uncover what past thinkers understood to be the transhistorical truths articulated in their writings. Yet in his studies, Fortin constantly raises the deeper and more fundamental

question of whether or not what a past author taught to be the truth is, in fact, true. That is to say, whatever scholarly historical seriousness one sees at work in these studies is there for the sake of a more contemplative seriousness that seeks to discover what is permanently true about the nature of human life-a pedagogic approach whose very possibility is dogmatically denied by the central tenets of modern historical consciousness.'

One important benefit of this approach to political reflection or historical study is that it allows one to see the writings of past thinkers as works that may illuminate our present situation. Fortin, however, does not succumb to the tempting, yet finally muddleheaded, belief that the writings of ancient pagans and Christians contain practical formulas that simply can be dusted off and instantly applied to the problems that mark our societies. Man, as Nietzsche knew well, is not a crab; he cannot retreat backwards into the past in order to escape the problems that he faces in the present or those that threaten his future. It is therefore important to recognize that Fortin's repeated return to a reconsideration of the thought of the past is not animated by any romantic longing for a bygone golden age or a lost garden of Eden. For modern liberalism and the thought that lies behind it has brought into existence a kind of society that was unknown in the ancient world. As Alexis de Tocqueville recognized, in modernity "the political world is metamorphosed; new remedies must henceforth be sought for new disorders."[4] It is in this spirit that Fortin's historical studies represent genuine dialectical encounters with the teachings of the great minds of the past, dialectical encounters that look backwards and forwards in order to view what lies directly ahead more clearly. Fortin's conservatism is thus more dialectical than reactionary, recognizing that theoretical wisdom can never substitute for the exercise of prudential judgment.

It seems to me that these general reflections should be kept in mind as one approaches Fortin's corpus. But what can one actually learn from the kind of consideration *of* responses to permanent problems and fundamental alternatives characteristic of Fortin's work? And what exactly are these fundamental alternatives and permanent problems, according to Fortin? Further still, what pre-

cisely does all of this have to do with Christianity, the expressed concern (at least according to their titles) of two of the three volumes that comprise this collection? These are all questions that Fortin himself repeatedly raises in his *Collected Essays.* The answers to these questions can only be found through the careful filtering through the themes and arguments of his essays.

II.

The Birth of Philosophic Christianity, the first volume of *Collected Essays,* brings to life the tension ridden but fruitful and, in some sense, indispensable encounter between Greek philosophy and the Christian religion. Perhaps more than its two counterparts, the volume displays Fortin's remarkable range of learning on the subject of the relation of Christianity to the different philosophic and political traditions within Western civilization. By far the most theoretical book of the collection, *The Birth of Philosophic Christianity is* also the most radical. Fortin here recounts and to some degree relives the at times heated exchanges that "the early intellectual caretakers of Christianity" had with their pagan contemporaries. The essays in this volume thus stand in marked contrast to much of the present-day scholarship on the polemical tracts of the Church Fathers, the majority of which either approaches these works in an antiquarian and archaeological spirit or unconsciously reads them in light of their later, "official" Christian reinterpretations. It is, in fact, precisely his ability and willingness to take the pagan philosophic and political accounts of human life seriously that gives Fortin's essays their at times jarring character. To those who would prefer to think that philosophic Christianity did not have to be born but rather always existed, Fortin annoyingly recalls how and why the learned Christians of the ancient world labored to put to rest their less than flattering image as "theologizing fisherman"(BPC, 3).

That Christians had such a reputation in the first place can be attributed to the surface presentation of the Biblical teaching. While the revealed Scriptures do speak of such things as the nature of truth, the structure of the whole, and the form of human perfection, they do so in a noticeably nontheoretical way. The Bible itself does not

engage in anything like theoretical speculation. Nor does it offer proofs of the teachings it contains. Instead, the Scriptures recount facts in the form of alleged historical testimonies and issue commands whose binding force lies not on reasoned arguments but on the fact that they express the divine will. Moreover, on the rare occasions when the Scriptures do speak of theoretical speculation, more often than not, it is to dissuade the faithful from engaging in such an activity. For example, St. Paul, hardly the most unlearned of the Biblical writers, warns his brethren to make sure that they do not fall prey to "philosophy," an "empty deceit" that is sure to lead one away from the path of divine righteousness(Colossians 2.8). Little wonder, therefore, that to many of the intellectual heirs of Greek philosophy Christianity seemed to be a religion for second-rate intellects.

Yet while theoretical speculation is neither indigenous to nor required by the Scriptures themselves, there is something about "the nature of the Christian revelation that renders theological speculation indispensable in the long run"(BPC, 4). For in contrast to the immediately recognizable legal form that the Jewish and Islamic religions take, Christianity initially comes to sight as a transpolitical "sound doctrine"(I *Timothy* 1.10). Whereas it is adherence to their respective divine laws that marks the Jew and the Muslim as believers, the Christian religion does not purport to have a law, at least in the sense that Judaism and Islam understand the word. The community of Christian believers is bound together not by *any* comprehensive legal and social system, but by the shared belief in a set of revealed doctrines. Accordingly justification does not depend so much upon the performance of lawful deeds, but on the purity and the steadfastness of a man's faith. It is this emphasis on the primacy of faith that explains why Christianity somewhat reluctantly opened itself to a kind of theoretical speculation. For if man is finally judged on the purity of his beliefs about God, what is known about God must be rendered as accurately and lucidly as possible.

The problem, however, is that the Bible generally, and the New Testament in particular, regularly speaks about God in a manner that

differs from the way in which man is accustomed to thinking. To take the most obvious example, the Trinitarian God who is revealed in the New Testament appears to imply the existence of three gods, a possibility that the Bible's monotheism flatly denies. A kind of theoretical reflection therefore was called for that could provide expositions of the Christian revelation that moved beyond "the mere restatement of the teachings of Sacred Scripture" to a clearer understanding of the less than transparent tenets that the religion claimed were so vital to salvation(BPC, 199). In light of this situation, Christianity resolved to make use of terms and concepts borrowed from philosophy. The desire to achieve greater clarity about the import of the Christian revelation accordingly required that scriptural admonitions against philosophy like that found in the *Letter to the Colossians* be reinterpreted so as to persuade Christians that the Bible "did not mean to condemn all philosophers indiscriminately" (BCP, 100).

The subsequent reformulation of the New Testament revelation in theological terms constituted what Fortin does not hesitate to call a refounding of Christianity. Fortin is particularly adept at pointing out how the very idea of a refounding poses interesting questions to the apostolic dimension of Christianity, whose depth and strength rests on its claim to have preserved an unbroken tradition dating back to Christ. For the refounding did not simply mark the return to the original founding. To be sure, in Christianity's case, as was true in the classical world generally, refounding did not entail the kind of root and branch break with the past with which refounding has come to be associated with in modernity. It nevertheless required that Christian thinkers labor to reconcile a theological presentation of the faith with the spirit of the religion's original founding. Great care and delicacy was needed then to transpose, but not to transform, the Christian revelation into doctrines that at best were present only in seed in the Bible.

The remarkable degree of continuity that the refounding maintained with the original founding readily comes to sight if one reads, say, the prologue to the *Gospel of John* in light of the decree of the council of Chalcedon. But their differences grow clearer once one

imagines having only the Scriptures at his disposal and then being presented with the council's final statement on the Incarnation. Given these circumstances, Fortin strikingly concludes, it is doubtful

> whether any of [the New Testament writers] would have made much sense...of the *definitio fidei* of Chalcedon, all of whose terms, with the single exception of "Jesus Christ" can be traced to a definite philosophic source(BCP, 3).

As do many contemporary Patristic scholars, Fortin takes Christianity's refounding to have been achieved chiefly although not exclusively through the efforts of St. Augustine. Such an appreciation of St. Augustine is not the sole preserve of nineteenth and twentieth century scholarship. No less a towering figure than St. Jerome reports that his contemporary commonly was revered "as the second founder of the ancient faith."[5] What is unique to Fortin's presentation of St. Augustine is the emphasis he places on the social and, in some attenuated sense, political dimensions of his refounding of Christianity.' That is not to say that he denies the more theological component of the Augustinian refounding, say, his Trinitarian reflections in *De Trinitate,* but that its significance and impact is quietly assumed in his essays. Fortin's essays thus focus on a part of St. Augustine's corpus that has been neglected by modern Augustine scholars, namely, his reflections on the proper relation of Christianity to political life.'

That Christians have tended to ignore St. Augustine's writings on these matters underscores the need to return to and recover the lessons of these works. It was, after all, in part the recognition that the transpolitical character of Christianity inclines men to be forgetful of political life that moved St. Augustine to remind his brethren of their political obligations in the first place. There is, then, something ironic about the fact that his teaching on these matters eventually fell on deaf ears.

As a transpolitical religion, Christianity focuses a man's gaze on a goal that transcends the distinctions that dominate and, to a large degree, determine the character of political life. Christians conse-

quently are less apt to see themselves as citizens of any one political community as they are to understand themselves in terms of a more all-encompassing whole or good. In this respect, Christianity is similar to philosophy, inasmuch as the transpolitical character of each lessens a man's attachment to the political community in which he lives.' Moreover, many of its more famous moral teachings appear to conflict with the kinds of demands that political life places on men. For example, the Gospel's teaching on the equality of all men in the eyes of God and Christ's injunction to turn the other cheek suggest that Christian morality is incompatible with the military duties of citizenship, an appealing and persistent argument that Rousseau forcefully restates in the penultimate chapter of the *Social Contract.* Further still, not only can the transpolitical character of Christianity make men forgetful of their attachment to the political, but it can make them contemptuous of political life altogether. Whether in the form of Gnostic heresies or in the zealousness of various mendicant reforms, Christians, at times, have taken the affairs of civil life to be destructive of the kind of spiritual life called for by the Gospel. Christianity, in other words, can have its own analogue to the type of anti-political animus that provoked the ancient Epicureans to retire to their private gardens and to view those engaged in political life as mutilated human beings.

As Fortin maps out in rich detail, St. Augustine set before himself a task not entirely different from the one Plato's Socrates undertakes in the *Republic,* namely, to give an account of why a man who has come to understand his life in terms of something beyond the political willingly should reattach himself to the life of the city. St. Augustine's response to this challenge was to argue that the moral teachings of Christianity require that patriotism take on the form of a religious duty. The distinctively Christian injunction to love one's neighbor as oneself does not mean that Christians should forsake their responsibilities within civil society; rather Christian charity requires that they devote themselves to the good of their fellow citizens with an intensity unknown and unimaginable in the Greek *polls.* Moreover, the religion's moral teachings are compatible with the military requirements of citizenship. Christ, St. Augustine

observes, did not command soldiers to throw down their arms, but charged them to perform their duties righteously. What the Gospel condemns is not so much war itself, but the vices to which the love of war gives rise, vices that necessarily threaten the life of the city when it is at rest. Contrary to how they appear, the high moral demands that Christianity places on men contribute far more to the life of the city than those of the pagan religions ever could(BPC, 36).

St. Augustine's defense of Christian morality thus included and relied upon a critique of the political utility of the pagan religions. Accordingly, the opening books of his *City of God* launch an all out attack on the various theologies of ancient Rome. Their aim was to show that the cult of the Roman gods, not the introduction of Christianity, was to blame for the setbacks that recently had beset the empire. Fortin guides his reader through these books showing how St. Augustine criticizes the empire's poetic or mythological theology for creating a pantheon of gods and goddesses all of whom proved terrible moral examples for the multitude allegedly entrusted in their care. By depicting the gods as perpetrators of grave injustices, the poets glorified and deified vice, thus contributing to the corruption of Roman society. Nor was Rome's civil theology immune from a similar charge. St. Augustine uses the testimony of the great chronicler of Roman religion Marcus Varro to expose the inadequacies of Roman civil theology. As its name suggests, Roman civil theology prescribed the regulations that governed the empire's religious practices. In contrast to the temporal rewards of which poetic theology speaks, civil theology addresses the punishments and rewards that result from compliance with the dictates of the city's religious practices in the afterlife. By pulling back the thin veil with which Varro had covered his writings, St. Augustine allowed all to see that the Roman historian did not believe in the gods, but saw them for what they were, the creations of the most ancient poets. In the end, St. Augustine argued, it was not that Christianity's introduction into Rome caused the jealous gods to seek revenge on the city, but that Rome's poetic and civil theology were too intertwined to prevent a form of semi-religious moral corruption from infecting the empire.

St. Augustine was less critical, but finally not fully acceptant, of the natural theologies of the ancient philosophers. To be sure, some of these theologies agreed with parts of the revealed teachings of the faith, e.g., their adherence to monotheism and the distinction they drew between the human soul and the divine nature. What is more, these theologies frequently led the philosophers to define happiness in terms of virtue or excellence, a point with which St. Augustine also concurred. Yet in their works virtue and, hence, happiness was seen to be the preserve of only those rare souls whose natures allowed them to take part in the philosophic life; to the majority of men, virtue and happiness were impossibilities. The problem that beset the philosophers' teachings, according to St. Augustine, was that they were too willing to accept the elusiveness of justice in human affairs. As their writings revealed, the philosophers were certain that the love of one's own that grew out of man's bodily nature and the bad habits that imperfect laws inculcate in men ensured that the bulk of men could not become lovers of justice. The truly just society was a human impossibility, something that existed only in speech and could not be translated into action. Men finally must rest content with trying to achieve some diluted form of justice within their social and political arrangements, one that maximized the advantages of justice while minimizing, but never eradicating, the disadvantages of injustice. St. Augustine was thus led to conclude that the classical philosophers were to be commended for speaking of happiness in terms of the highest goals to which men can aspire, but were to be faulted for their inability "to show the way to those goals"(BCP, 5).

St. Augustine's criticisms of the moral teachings of the philosophers foreshadow those Machiavelli would advance centuries later, inasmuch both turn the philosophers' principles against themselves. Both St. Augustine and Machiavelli object to the utopian and impractical character of the ancients' teachings. But while Machiavelli sought to lower the standards of justice to ensure their actualization, St. Augustine insisted on retaining the high standards, but offered a more certain way of overcoming the problem of human weakness. His solution consisted of following Christ, who reveals the true end of man's existence and provides the means by which that end is to be

attained. Whereas the ancient philosophers set forth a teaching that necessarily accepted a gulf separating sound theory from sound practice, the beatifying truth of the Christian revelation bound the two together so that the one was unthinkable without the other. No longer, St. Augustine argued, could one rest satisfied with the philosophic teaching that man must choose between the good of his intellect and the good of his body and soul. Inasmuch as the object of Christian revelation cannot be known unless it is loved, "it represents the good, not of the intellect alone, but of the whole person and thus carries with it the guarantee of happiness"(BCP, 6). By bringing a man's will into conformity with his intellect, the revealed knowledge of the Christian faith had the ability to transform the man who apprehended it.

Fortin is quick to concede that the philosophic problem with St. Augustine's solution is that it requires *faith* in an unproved revelation, an act of will that philosophers are by definition reluctant to make. St. Augustine himself knew that the philosopher's "swollen pride" would not allow him to think that his salvation depended on having faith in an allegedly revealed messiah. For philosophers "want to provide their own happiness," and refuse to believe that only God "can lavish such a gift."[9] More fundamentally, and perhaps more in keeping with St. Augustine's understanding of the philosopher, when confronted with the question of whether or not he would chose to accept the salvific truth of the Christian revelation, a philosopher would be likely to ask, why he needed to be saved? "On that basis," Fortin concludes, "it is perhaps true to say that the philosopher is the man who comes closest to Christianity and at the same time the one who remains furthest away from it"(CCPO, 18).

In his defense of the compatibility of Christianity with the obligations of citizenship, St. Augustine therefore turned the city's accusations against the Christian religion on their head. Far from making men into the worst citizens, when compared to the morally corrupting pagan gods and the half-hearted effect that the philosophic teaching on theory and practice brings about, the Christian faith is seen to produce the best citizens. At one and the same time, a man could be both a good Christian and a good citizen simply by

being faithful to the New Testament's injunction to render to Caesar what was Caesar's and to God what was God's. The everyday life of the Christian was to be characterized by the kind of "dual citizenship" for which his *City of God is* famous. The problem, Fortin notes, is that the harmony that seemingly is struck by this type of arrangement is likely to break down once one becomes convinced that everything belongs to Caesar. What Fortin does not explicitly state, but seems to imply, is that a similar kind of collapse is bound to occur once Christians begin to believe that no legitimate authority has been given over to Caesar. Despite these internal difficulties, Fortin observes that the solution St. Augustine proposed worked "remarkably well" in his own day and thus raises the provocative question, to which he never openly returns, of whether or not it behooves Christians to adopt a similar approach today. That Fortin advises answering this question in the affirmative can be gleaned by the fact that "the dual citizenship proposal" is the one Christian response to the theoretically irresolvable theologico-political problem that his essays present as a genuine, practical possibility. Indeed, given the frequency with which the question of the current feasibility of the Augustinian solution is raised in his essays, it is fair to say that a primary practical concern of many of Fortin's writings is to educate contemporary Christianity about the need for, and the desirability of, adopting such an approach.

The Birth of Philosophic Christianity also presents an extremely erudite treatment of the role esoteric writing played in the works of the Church Fathers. That such an art of writing was practiced by these authors is difficult to deny. Boethius, for example, near the beginning of his *De Trinitate* informs his reader that "I have adopted a concise style, and what I have taken from the innermost studies of philosophy I veil with significations...so that they may speak only to me and to you.'" Fortin is careful, however, to distinguish Christian esotericism from its philosophic predecessor. Both the political arrangements in Greece and Rome and a concern for sound pedagogy moved the ancient philosophers to veil their "esoteric" teachings with more salutary, "exoteric" teachings. Whereas the esoteric teaching set forth what the philosopher thought to be true always

and everywhere, the exoteric teaching accommodated itself to the political climate of the *day* by advancing doctrines that would be seen as necessary and advantageous. The practice itself served three separate, yet interrelated, purposes: 1) to protect philosophers advancing potentially unpopular political teachings from persecution, *2)* to protect the political community from philosophic truths that would prove devastating to its particular way of life, and, *3)* to allow the attentive reader to ascend in an orderly manner from the realm of opinion to the realm of truth. The beauty, and justness, of this form of writing was that it permitted the philosopher to address a variety of men at the same time, each in accordance with his own intellectual needs and limitations.

Where Christian esotericism parted company with its philosophic counterpart was on the issue of promulgating falsehoods through exoteric teachings. The classic illustration of this kind of philosophic deception appears in Plato's *Republic,* where Socrates advises his two interlocutors that if their plan to found the perfectly just city is to succeed, they must be willing to disseminate a "noble lie [u] And given that this noble lie relates falsehoods about the nature of the divinity and his relation to man, it is easy to see why Christian piety would object to such a practice. Remarkably, however, Christians did not always refrain from including such lies in their own writings. Fortin relates that members of the Alexandrian school, most notably Clement of Alexandria and Origen, were not opposed to placing salutary lies in their writings if they would advance or defend the interests of the community of Christian believers(BCP, *134).* It was only with St. Augustine that Christianity came to reject noble lies as a matter of principle. With St. Augustine lying became recognized as an intrinsically evil act, and thus intolerable on the part of a Christian writer. The reasoning behind his condemnation of lying was linked to the doctrinal nature of Christianity. For believing a lie about God moved a man away from sound doctrine, placing the state of his soul in jeopardy. Moreover, if it is permissible for a Christian author to lie in his writings, what ostensibly prevents a man from calling into question the veracity of a Scriptural author and therewith the truth of the Bible as whole(BCP, 90)? To avoid

this slippery slope, St. Augustine recognized that all lies, noble as well as ignoble, must be seen as incompatible with the salvific teachings of the Christian faith.

Yet strikingly, and perhaps scandalously to the modem reader, the recognition that the integrity of the faith required the banning of noble lies did not lead to the subsequent conclusion that Christianity should, or even could, dispense with the practice of esoteric writing altogether. Christian authors realized, as had their philosophic predecessors, that they had to contend with the fact that their works would be read by the unlettered as well as the lettered. Christianity, in other words, recognizes a moral and not an intellectual form of egalitarianism. In practical terms this meant that a Christian writing had to be crafted in such a way that it would be profitable to the more learned reader, yet beneficial to, and not destructive of, the faith of the untutored reader. This task was made all the more difficult by the complex nature of the Christological and Trinitarian debates that dominated the intellectual scene in the early Church. But even less subtle issues, if discussed too openly, could prove threatening to the faith of the simple believer, e.g., a discussion about God's incorporeity could lead a pious, unlettered man to despair after reading that his God does not dwell anywhere. Charity dictated that certain theological and philosophical questions be presented in such a way that they were imperceptible and, hence, not threatening to the reader whose intellect and faith were incapable of handling them(BCP, 127-131).

It was this concern with not disrupting the faith of the simple believer that inclined the Church Fathers to adopt a peculiar form of esoteric writing when addressing thorny philosophic and theological problems. Over questions which classical philosophy and Christianity sharply disagreed, e.g., the rational status of moral virtue, the Church Fathers carefully muted the differences between the two camps, giving them the appearance of a greater degree of agreement than was actually the case. Such muffling required one to quote from a philosophic text judiciously or, as was more regularly the case, to paraphrase it loosely so that the author seemed to agree with the teachings of Christianity. The practice required, in other

words, that the theologian know exactly what a philosophic work taught, for only then could he be sure which of its teachings would and which of its teachings would not play a salutary role in his own writings. To gain this kind of intimate familiarity with a philosophic text entailed the theologian to take what the Church Fathers called a "noble risk," since to engage in an honest dialectic with the thought of a philosopher exposes one's faith to a potentially debilitating, if not devastating, rational critique. Fortin acknowledges that the glossing over of differences and the blunting of edges that this pious form of esotericism required may not have been as dissimilar to the "old art of lying" as the Church Fathers may have liked to believe(BCP, 147). On the other hand, he points out that "Christian esotericism" was at times solely responsible for pagan thought playing a salutary role in the intellectual and moral formation of Christians.[12]

The final section of *The Birth of Philosophic Christianity* brings together several of Fortin's penetrating essays on the celebrated medieval poet Dante Alighieri. The Dante that comes to light in these essays is likely to be unrecognizable to many contemporary readers. Over against the prevailing literary view, spearheaded in this country by Charles Singleton, of Dante as the poet who gave a beautiful voice to the medieval Christian world-view, Fortin describes a philosophic poet whose *Comedy is* packed with insightful criticisms of the decayed political conditions in medieval Christianity and profound, original meditations on the relation of Christian theology to philosophy. His essays open up dimensions of the *Comedy* that have long been closed to modern Dante scholars who abstract from the theologico-political dimension of Dante's thought.

More than anything else, Fortin presents Dante as a thinker whose thought is marked by an uncompromising studied ambiguity. Dante's allegorical mode of writing in the *Comedy is* designed to allow the poet to present himself differently to different readers. At one and the same time, Dante can appear to be both a thoughtful, pious Christian and a cautious Aristotelian philosopher. In short, Dante is, according to Fortin, an esoteric writer. Fortin's ambiguous account of the poet stands in sharp contrast to that of the great historian of medieval philosophy Etienne Gilson, who in the first

half of this century did much to popularize the view of Dante's work as a poetic expression of Thomism. It is then perhaps the "cultured" Christian who understands Dante to be the canonical poet of the Church who is most likely to find Fortin's account of the Florentine objectionable.

While Dante could lament the fact that he lived at time when political life had gone into hibernation, he did witness something of a privileged moment in the history of Christian thought. With the introduction of Aristotle's treatises into Christian universities in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Christianity underwent an intellectual revolution. Prior to this event, the philosophic teachings that most Christian readers had access to consisted of whatever strains of Greek philosophy one could find strewn about the works of the Church Fathers. Such writings, however, provided the opportunity to study only those features of Greek philosophy that openly conformed to or readily could be made to conform to the teachings of the faith. But with the translation of Aristotle's writings into Latin came the opportunity for Christians to encounter Greek philosophy not as a largely sanitized collection of axioms and conclusions, but as something of a living organism. Aristotle's works spoke to the full range of human concerns and did so in a manner that depended not on the teachings of divine revelation, but on rational scientific inquiry.

By paying close attention to the detailed surface of the *Comedy,* Fortin shows how Dante not only participated in but furthered the medieval Aristotelian revolution. To Fortin, one cannot underestimate the sincerity of the *Inferno's* description of Aristotle as "the master of those who know."[13] Along these lines, he unearths an Aristotelian political undercurrent to the *Comedy* that has eluded both literary humanists and Neo-Thomists. Of course, some Dante scholars, A.P. d'Entreves being the most prominent, have noticed a political side to Dante's teaching; but most relegate this to the political proposals of the *De Monarchia.* If political concerns are seen to enter the spiritual odyssey of the *Comedy* at all, they are taken to be in its explicit attacks on the corruption of the medieval papacy. Often, however, even these criticisms are interpreted as

being motivated less by a genuine concern for political life than by a pious disdain for simony. In contrast, Fortin's Dante is neither a cultural aesthete nor a pious ecclesiastical reformer, but a deeply political thinker.

Dante's chief political adversary was Boniface VIII, whose Papal Bull *Unam Sanctam* in effect claimed for the Pope unrestricted theocratic authority. Boniface's claim rested on an appeal to the doctrine of the two swords. While previously interpreted to mean that the Pope wielded one sword over spiritual matters and gave the other sword to a political authority who ruled over temporal matters, the Bull reduced the authority of a temporal ruler simply to executing the Church's orders regarding punishing and soldiering. Dante's response to the intrusion of the Church into the political sphere was to argue for the legitimate authority of an emperor who received his authority directly from God. The emperor was neither subordinate to the Pope nor his equal, since the two ruled within different spheres: the former securing temporal happiness as articulated by the political philosophers, the latter offering men spiritual instruction in accordance with the demands of eternal life. What is striking about this proposal is that it runs counter to Aristotle's teaching about empire and political life. Strictly speaking, for Aristotle imperialism is destructive of political life. [14] The empire substitutes self-aggrandizement and brutish repression for a political life characterized by free and equal citizens ruling and being ruled in turn. A relatively small *polis* and not an empire is the political society most conducive to human flourishing, according to Aristotle. Advocating a form of rule that dissolves political life as *the* alternative to the suffocating political effects of Papal theocracy thus does not seem to be a solution that a faithful student of Aristotle would propose.

Yet Dante, Fortin argues, may not have had any alternative. For in addition to holding off the graspingness of the Papacy, there was the need to defend Christendom from the genuine threat of Islamic expansionism. Moreover, Dante had to contend with a force that Aristotle could not have foreseen, namely, the hold Biblical monotheism had come to have on men. Whereas each *polis* had its own set

of gods, Christianity held forth a God who transcended the religious distinctions of any one city and who had provided a spiritual leader to tend the flock in his absence. As a result, institutionalized Papal authority easily could, and did, overshadow the authority of any particular local ruler. A political form of universalism was needed therefore that could counter the Church's claim to universality. Fortin further points out that the kind of empire that Dante championed did not destroy the distinctive character of its component parts. Quite the contrary, the internal structure of the empire advocated by Dante allowed authentic political life to subsist within it by permitting local rulers to exercise latitude in legislating for their own communities. Dante's vision of the empire was, in fact, neither homogenous nor despotic. In the final analysis, though it deviated from the letter of Aristotle's *Politics,* the proposal "to broaden the scope of imperial rule so as to make it coextensive with that of the Pope" may have been "the only feasible" prudential argument a medieval student of Aristotelian political philosophy could make in defending the possibility of political life(BPC, 288).

Although Fortin leaves no doubt as to where Dante's political allegiances lied, he is less forthcoming about where Dante personally stood on the issue of belief versus unbelief. This is all the more striking in that Fortin artfully unfolds the *Comedy's* teaching on the relation of faith and reason, preserving its subtly while elucidating its essential nature. Fortin presents the question of faith and reason as providing the backdrop in front of which the drama of the entire *Comedy* occurs. Fortin's Dante understands Christian faith and philosophy to represent two separate and ultimately irreconcilable ways of life. The former requires uncompromising submission to the requirements of divine revelation, the latter an erotic desire to inquire on one's own into the nature of all things. Whereas the life of faith demands that one humble oneself by placing his trust in a revelation that is by definition indemonstrable, the philosophic life requires that a man suspend his judgment about anything whose proper cause remains unknown to him. The man of faith and the philosopher, according to Fortin's Dante, could not be anymore different.

Clearly whether or not Dante was a believing Christian certainly is not a question of the greatest moment. Nor would a negative answer to this question alter the fact that Christians have much to learn from Dante: Christianity has learned more about herself from the pagan Aristotle than she has from scores of *soi-disant* theologians. Yet one cannot help but wonder why in these essays Fortin hesitates to go beyond the observation that Dante's stance on the question of belief versus unbelief remains ambiguous and offer the reader his own thoughts as to which way of life he takes the poet to have chosen. This silence is all the more puzzling given the less than pious portrait Fortin paints of Dante. If the life of faith requires that one humbly submits to the revealed word of God, the Dante that Fortin describes has not undergone such a conversion. Fortin's Dante is a man whose appreciation of his own self-worth and abilities knows no limits. To take the most outrageous example, Fortin, tracing the chronology of the *Comedy,* discovers that Dante positions himself at the literal center of human history. Lest the jarring character of this claim be lost on the reader, it should be remembered that in Christian theology, a study with which Dante was deeply familiar, it is Christ who occupies *the* central place in human history. As Fortin observes, "in a subtle and more than slightly blasphemous way," Dante casts himself as "the new Adam of Christian theology"(BCP, *275).* Such a claim surely cannot be reconciled with the humility and faithfulness that the Christian religion demands from its followers.

Careful attention to Fortin's presentation of Dante's thought reveals then that he does not, strictly speaking, leave the question of Dante's faith in the balance. But why does he choose to address the question indirectly, leaving his reader to piece together the clues left for him? The answer seems to be that Fortin wants his readers, believers and non-believers alike, to confront Dante's thought directly and to think through for themselves how the poet understood himself in relation to Christianity. Fortin's reticence therefore is intended to serve as an invitation for his readers to study the way in which a thinker of Dante's depth and penetration understood the choice between faith and reason and thus to gain a greater appreciation

of what it means to be a thoughtful believer or, for that matter, a thoughtful non-believer.

III.

Classical Christianity and the Political Order, the second volume of *Collected Essays,* contains many of Fortin's penetrating reflections on the dialectical encounter between the Christian religion and the great tradition of political philosophy. Although the majority of its essays consider St. Augustine's political writings, the core of the book consists of its analysis of the political thought of St. Thomas Aquinas. But in addition to its treatments of St. Augustine and St. Thomas this volume explores the impact of Aristotle's political teaching on medieval Christian thought. Indeed, the book represents the fruit of Fortin's lifelong meditation on St. Thomas's encounter with, and appropriation of, Aristotle's thought. Its essays describe in considerable detail the heroic effort that was needed to achieve this appropriation, but do so in a way that does not gloss over the intractable tensions that characterize the Thomistic enterprise. Viewed in this light, the two great, implicit themes of the book are Fortin's reconstruction of St. Thomas's and Aristotle's dialectic about on the nature of nature and the radically divergent effect each man's answer to this question had on his understanding of a genuinely human life. *Classical Christianity and the Political Order,* in other words, is not the work of a dyed-in-the-wool Thomist, but of someone who approaches St. Thomas and Aristotle on their own terms and who thus is able to appreciate their genuine similarities as well as their profound differences.

Fortin believes that the limitations of the theology that medieval Christianity inherited from the Patristic period largely explain why the theologians of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries were willing and even eager to turn to Aristotle's presentation of the natural world. In many respects, Patristic theology had come to be identified with St. Augustine. While St. Augustine's genius undoubtedly surpassed that of the other Church Fathers, his writings had their limitations. Most substantially, Augustinian theology conspicuously lacked anything resembling a fully developed notion of nature. The

Augustinian tradition as a whole, Fortin observes, failed to produce a single treatise devoted to the discussion of nature. St. Augustine's medieval disciples consequently were not inclined to see the natural world as something that had its own inner consistency and intelligibility, but as an

> elaborate system of symbols, an enchanted forest as it were, in which every tree, flower, or other natural object functions as a reminder of an invisible reality far more beautiful than anything the eye has ever seen(BPC, 15-16).[15]

Fortin takes this general inability to speak adequately about nature to be the Achilles' heel of Augustinian theology. This is, in fact, the one, substantial criticism that Fortin levels against St. Augustine's thought (BPC, 15-16; CCPO, 210-211) and partially explains why the essays in *Classical Christianity and the Political Order* display such critical respect for medieval theologians like St. Thomas who realized that Aristotelian philosophy could help them overcome the lacunae in Augustinian theology.

Nowhere is this critical respect more visible than in Fortin's treatment of the Thomistic natural law teaching. Though the essays in this volume make clear that Fortin, strictly speaking, is not a natural law thinker, at the same time they reveal his deep appreciation of the doctrine's ability to mediate between the competing claims of the body and the soul while providing a theoretical support for natural justice. Fortin takes St. Thomas to be the natural law teacher *par excellence.* Prior to St. Thomas, a small number of thinkers had set forth natural law teachings. St. Augustine, for example, in his *De Libero Arbitrio* presents a natural law teaching that is often overlooked by scholars.[16] But St. Augustine's natural law offers little more than a general principle stating that the high should not be subordinate to the low in either an individual or a society. The same type of elevated vagueness characterizes the natural law teaching found in the Stoics' works on natural science as well as the exoteric or political presentation of natural law in Cicero's *De Re Publica* and *De Legibus.* Accordingly, it was not until the thirteenth century that St. Thomas, assisted by the recently rediscovered Aristotelian natu-

ral science, finally would give the natural law doctrine its most precise and classic formulation.

St. Thomas's natural law teaching is found in the so-called "Treatise on Law" in the *Prima Secundae* of the *Summa Theologiae.* As stated in its preface, the treatise purports to discuss law, one of two extrinsic principles, the other being grace, that move a man to his ultimate end, happiness. St. Thomas insists that prior to the infusion of grace and apart from revelation, a man can know the general principles of natural justice and act in accordance with them to the degree to which his will has not been corrupted by sin. As a natural being, man has in himself a natural inclination towards the end or ends to which his nature, like those of all natural beings, is ordered. St. Thomas thus affirms the existence of a natural order that is distinct from, but not opposed to, the higher order that man is called into by God's grace. While the supernatural order of grace perfects the order of nature, it does so in a way that respects the integrity and hierarchical structure of the natural order. Nature, then, is deemed to possess a kind of autonomy that is not directly dependent upon the reception of grace for its proper form of perfection. As part of this natural order, man seeks his own preservation as a substance; the propagation of the species and the education of children as do all animals; and knowledge of the truth, especially the truth about God, and life within society as a rational being.

St. Thomas maintains that a man becomes aware of the general precepts that are to govern human actions by reflecting upon his natural inclinations and in the knowledge of the ends to which these inclinations prompt him. Promulgated by nature herself and grasped by the light of reason, these general precepts or principles constitute a law that, although articulating only the most general standards of human behavior-standards which St. Thomas roughly equates with the commandments of the second table of the Decalogue, nonetheless reveals the morality of certain actions. In addition to revealing the goodness or badness of human actions, however, the natural law as a law commands or forbids the performance of specific actions. Fortin observes that when the moral life is viewed from

within this kind of legal framework it takes on a distinctively non-Aristotelian orientation, one that "in the final instance" is animated not by a desire to act for the sake of the noble but by the willful compliance with "an unconditionally binding law"(CCPO, *167).*

But Fortin's reservations about the Thomistic natural law teaching have less to do with its legal character than they do with its ability to be known naturally. Following earlier treatments by Leo Strauss and Harry Jaffa, Fortin too raises thorny questions about the *naturalness* of the so-called natural law." Central to this critique is the question of the sanctions that are attached to the natural law. Fortin never tires of pointing out that in order for the natural law to be a law in the proper sense of the term it must have sanctions attached to it, since a law without teeth in it is not strictly speaking a law (CCPO, 167, 215, *277-278, 359).* But what precisely is the nature of the rewards and punishments that are attached to the natural law and are the sanctions attached to the natural law enforced in the present life, the life known to reason, or in the next life, the life whose existence is vouchsafed by revelation? If it is the latter, the recognition of the binding character of the natural law then appears to require knowledge of things that exist outside of the realm of nature. St. Thomas himself hints at this problem by observing that in this world there are times when it seems that "the evil man" receives "external goods" for his actions while the "virtuous man" has these same goods taken away.'[8] In connection with this question, Fortin raises the problem of the "happy crook," a breed about whom moralists have long maintained a conspicuous silence, according to Nietzsche. While Fortin does not insist on this matter too much, he does not rule out the possibility that there may be men who have perpetrated a small number of evils and are not tormented by the "natural" pains of a guilty conscience.

As Fortin makes clear, the pursuit of questions like these reveals that the Thomistic doctrine essentially requires men to recognize that the natural law "is both promulgated and enforced by God...the author of nature" and as such "is binding on everyone"(CCPO, 213). At its highest theoretical point, in other words, the Thomistic natural law doctrine presupposes knowledge of a Providential God, i.e., of

a God who wills that men act justly. And, as evidenced by the arguments of works like Plato's *Euthyphro* and Aristotle's *Metaphysics,* knowledge of such a God is not accessible to unassisted reason. On the basis of these observations, Fortin finally is led to conclude that St. Thomas's natural law doctrine is more theological than philosophical. To state the problem somewhat differently, what St. Thomas presents is not so much a natural law teaching but a natural law teaching about created nature.'[9]

To this charge, the thoughtful student of St. Thomas could respond that the natural law does indeed point to the created character of nature and that, inasmuch as reason can neither prove nor disprove the act of creation, the Thomistic natural law doctrine remains a theoretical possibility. To be sure, such a response would demand a more subtle and less dogmatic reading of St. Thomas than contemporary Thomists are wont to give as well as a greater appreciation of the rich, open-ended character of the premodern understanding of nature. Nevertheless, in light of the kind of the criticisms that Strauss, Jaffa, and Fortin advance, perhaps it behooves the student of St. Thomas to point out to these critics that, as they themselves insist, as regards proofs *or* disproofs of the existence of the natural law the questions involved remain more certain than their solutions.

Fortin's criticisms of the Thomistic natural law doctrine, however, differ from those of Strauss and Jaffa in that he believes that St. Thomas was aware of the internal difficulties that plague his teaching. While Jaffa in particular suggests that St. Thomas was unaware of the way in which Christian revelation informs his understanding of nature and therewith his view of man's natural knowledge of the natural law, Fortin argues that in this concern St. Thomas may "have been more guarded than [his] initial statements would seem to imply"(CCPO, 212). Fortin places significant weight on the fact that St. Thomas himself in the *Summa Theologiae* does not mention the kind of rewards and punishments that are bound up with the natural law. Moreover, Fortin notes that while St. Thomas initially states that the moral teaching of the entire Decalogue articulates the general precepts of the natural law, he later qualifies this remark by

acknowledging that the precepts of the first tablet, i.e., those enjoining the love and worship of God, are known only through instruction by faith.[20] Fortin takes this as an indication that St. Thomas recognized that the first and second tablets of the Decalogue really are inseparable from one another and that the precepts of the first tablet provide the ground for the binding legal character of those of the second. By drawing attention to the different cognitive status of the two tablets, St. Thomas subtly points out that the "self-evident" precepts of the second tablet rely upon the faithful recognition of the truth of the first tablet's teaching about God for their binding force. Far from being theoretically naive about the demonstrable character of the natural law, St. Thomas's subtle qualification of the natural law's general precepts suggests that for him "the status of the natural law as a purely rational concept remains at best problematic"(CCPO, 214).

Fortin also sets himself apart from many political scientists in the role he attributes to political prudence in St. Thomas's thought. St. Thomas's natural law teaching regularly is faulted for failing to take into consideration the kind of latitude for statesmanship that the exigencies of political life frequently demand. The Christian Aristotelian St. Thomas is often criticized for replacing the mutable natural right teaching characteristic of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics,* whose lack of fixity grants statesmen a breadth of option in acting politically, with an overly rigid and moralistic natural law whose precepts brook no exception. Yet by paying careful attention to the theological context of St. Thomas's natural law teaching as well as its unfolding presentation in the *Summa Theologiae,* Fortin convincingly argues that St. Thomas is not a proponent of moral absolutism, but a partisan of an older approach that understands the need for prudence in political life. He thus sheds much needed light on the fact that what many political scientists object to is not so much the rigidity of St. Thomas's thought, but the absolutist interpretations he has received at the hands of many *soi-disant* Thomists.[21] In so doing, Fortin performs the helpful service of showing precisely both how and why St. Thomas. was not a nineteenth or twentieth century Thomist.

Whereas many contemporary Thomists tend to speak as if participation in moral and political life simply requires following predetermined, inflexible rules of action, St. Thomas appreciated that moral and political deliberations are far more complicated. As a theologian, he understood that the acceptance of the Christian teaching about original sin required the further recognition that frequently moral principles are not directly applicable to the fallen conditions of human life. Moreover, he had learned from Aristotle that while moral actions always involve specific circumstances that must be taken into consideration, the political deliberations of the statesman regularly involve problems whose contingencies are greater and more variable than those that occur within the moral life of the individual. In contrast to the tendency of contemporary Thomism, St. Thomas did not simply identify the kind of moral demands that can be placed on an individual with those that can be expected of a political ruler. As a student of an earlier form of. political reflection, he neither radically separated morality and politics nor simplistically collapsed the distinction between the two. St. Thomas consequently recognized that the statesman is called upon occasionally to make decisions on matters in which "it is impossible to lay down any fixed or detailed rules" and thus whose morality "cannot be determined in advance"(CCPO, 236).

While the prudential decisions of the statesman are defensible, they are not optimal. Political life often presents situations in which there is no simply right way of acting, i.e., situations in which every choice is a deliberate, but not wholly satisfying, choice between various goods. This is the political implication of St. Thomas's admission that "in some cases of rare occurrence, through some special causes hindering the observance of such precepts," the secondary precepts of the natural law are subject to change.[22] By acknowledging the mutability of the secondary precepts of the natural law, St. Thomas draws attention to the fact that the natural law explicitly requires a free scope for human law and prudence on their own terms. It is the fear that such an appreciation of the role of political prudence "left too much to chance," Fortin concludes, that has inclined Thomists to favor more rigidly legalistic

interpretations of the natural law that willingly oversimplify the complexities of political life for the sake of arriving at an often inappropriate sense of moral certainty(CCPO, *236).*[2]

The essays in the concluding section of *Classical Christianity and the Political Order* bring together several of Fortin's reflections on one of the great influences on his thought, Leo Strauss. In these essays, Fortin unmistakably speaks as Strauss's student, evaluating the thought and the achievement of his teacher with the reverential piety characteristic of an appreciative and indebted pupil. While one of the essays, "Between the Lines: Was Leo Strauss a Secret Enemy of Morality," was written in response to a critique of Strauss, the others appeal to Strauss to cast light on larger, more thematic concerns. Fortin's reader therefore gets the distinct impression that Strauss is never far from his thought, frequently setting the terms of various debates for him and informing his judgments on important issues.

Though the essays touch upon all three of the great "tensions" that Strauss investigated in his works: 1) the quarrel between the ancients and the moderns, 2) the quarrel between philosophy and poetry, and 3) the tension between revelation and reason (or what Strauss often called the question of "Jerusalem" and "Athens"), it is his penetrating analysis of the fruitful tension between Biblical revelation and philosophy that is most emphasized by Fortin. Fortin thus differs from those students of Strauss who claim that he understood the tension between Jerusalem and Athens to be a variation of the age-old and in their view more fundamental quarrel between poetry and philosophy. According to this argument, Strauss thought that the account of the whole presented by the Bible, however formidable it may be, is basically a form of poetry and as such adds nothing substantially new to the quarrel between the Greek poets and the Greek philosophers. Religious faith as religious faith is the alternative to philosophy, and whether that faith be Greek, Biblical, or Egyptian is ultimately inconsequential.' Fortin, for his part, views the time and the effort Strauss devoted to studying the tension between Jerusalem and Athens as indications that he understood the monotheism and the self-consciousness of Biblical

revelation to challenge philosophy in way that the gods and the piety of Greek poetry never could. In Fortin's account, Strauss understood the Bible to make the case for revelation with a seriousness that was not known to the ancient philosophers.[25]

Arguably, the part of Strauss's teaching on reason and revelation that plays the greatest role in Fortin's own thought is his understanding of the irresolvable, fruitful tension that exists between the two kinds of knowledge. Strauss frequently remarked that the Biblical and the philosophic ways of life represented the two great alternatives for the human soul. They are genuine alternatives because each way of life demands from its participants a way of living that is not only foreign, but finally opposed, to the way advocated by the other. The philosophic life begins in wonder or the self-conscious recognition of ignorance; the Biblical life has its origins in obedience or the steadfast compliance with the commands of revelation. The one requires the freedom to doubt and therefore the ability to investigate, on one's own, into the beginnings or nature of all things; the other shuns such unrestrained freedom in faithful recognition that an indemonstrable divine revelation offers the one, true account of the beginnings and end of all things, including man. Whereas the believer looks upon the revealed Scriptures as his ultimate authority, the philosopher acknowledges only that authority that he himself discovers, the authority of nature. As Fortin repeatedly calls upon Strauss to point out, entrance into the city of Athens requires a form of currency that is not recognized in Jerusalem and *vice versa.*

To be sure, Fortin's Strauss "knew that, within certain limits," the teachings of these two ways of life could be accommodated with one another(CCPO, 310). To greater or lesser degrees, the achievements of medieval thinkers like Maimonides, Averroes, and St. Thomas serve as proof that religious communities can and ought to accommodate the existence of men with philosophic learning in their midst. For in knowing something about nature and using this knowledge as grounds for making distinctions, such men are able to show religious believers things about themselves they would not have known on their own. Indeed, it is precisely the dialogue that arises from this kind of arrangement, the ongoing dialectic between

the pride of the philosopher and the humility of the believer, that accounts for the vitality of Western civilization(CCPO, *295).* But accommodating is not synthesizing. While the former seeks to achieve an uneasy, yet fruitful, truce between differing parties, the latter attempts to transcend all tensions by forfeiting the distinctiveness of each party for the harmony that supposedly would come from some *tertium quid.* Athens and Jerusalem, reason and revelation, can coexist together, but they cannot and must not exist as one.

As Fortin explains, the effectual truth of this arrangement is that one is left with a kind of Mexican stand-off. As long as philosophy is understood as a way of life, it is essentially a non-dogmatic activity. Philosophy, in other words, is understood in terms of classical philosophy, a form of rationalism that, unlike its modern counterpart, does not turn in on itself and does not claim dogmatically to be based on something like Cartesian certainty. The philosopher's love of truth requires that he assent only to truths that he himself can demonstrate; whatever he cannot prove, he must suspend judgment about. As a result, the philosopher, inasmuch as the possibility of revelation can neither be proved nor disproved, must recognize the possibility that the Biblical way of life may be the true way. According to Fortin's Strauss, the philosopher necessarily remains agnostic, always admitting that the account of the whole set forth in the Bible might be true.[26] On the other hand, the believer must acknowledge that however reasonable his faith maybe, it ultimately requires an act of faith. To claim more than this is to exaggerate the rationality of faith and, therewith, to divorce the content of faith from the act of faith. Fortin delights in reminding Christian critics of Strauss that no less a defender of the reasonableness of Christianity than St. Thomas noted that with regard to what is called "fundamental theology" the best unaided human reason can do is prove that the arguments leveled against faith are inadequate and, hence, not compelling(CCPO, *325).*[27]

By carefully laying out the essential nature of philosophy as well as that of Biblical faith, Fortin understands Strauss to have provided an invaluable service to contemporary Christian theology. This is particular true given the state of theology during the nineteenth and

twentieth centuries. Over the past two centuries, Christian scholars characteristically have been inclined to gloss over the differences that separate theology from philosophy. As a consequence, they often unconsciously, or perhaps at times consciously, understated the insatiable inquisitiveness of the philosopher while significantly depreciating the role dogma plays for the theologian. Fortin laments that this blurring of distinctions has resulted in abstract concepts such as Etienne Gilson's famous idea of a "Christian philosophy," a confused notion that in its eagerness to give faith a rational support fails to do justice to the revealed character of much of the Christian teaching. Moreover, twentieth century Christian scholars regularly have been less than judicious in their decisions to reconcile Christianity with the thought of contemporary philosophers. Heidegger, for example, was frequently welcomed with open arms by Christian scholars who did not appreciate the radicalism of his teaching as well as its deeply anti-Christian character. Fortin recognizes that when this desire to bring about a synthesis between faith and contemporary philosophy is combined with the late modern effort to tame religious thought in the name of ungrounded commitment, man is vulnerable to postmodernism's twin teachings of relativism and perspectivism. The human soul is no longer torn between the vitality of the life of faith and the vitality of the life of philosophy, but rests all too satisfied with the intellectual, spiritual, political, and moral bankruptcy which characterized Nietzche's last men who believed that they have invented happiness (CCPO, 293-294). It is in the face of these dangers that Fortin unabashedly recommends that "theologians...discover that they have as much to learn from [Strauss] as they do from one another or any of their new allies about the. way in which they could regain some of their lost credibility"(CCPO, 295).

As he does with Dante, Fortin leaves the question of Strauss's stance on the issue of belief versus unbelief in the balance. In this, Fortin sets himself apart from many of Strauss's students who believe there is little doubt about where their master stood on this question.[28] Fortin's Strauss is a man whose mind and heart are torn in opposite directions, someone who at times is unsure whether he

should get down on his knees and pray or stand erect and gaze at the spheres. Fortin presents Strauss as a man who in an attempt to live the theologico-political problem constantly traffics between Jerusalem and Athens. By so doing, perhaps Fortin indirectly makes the strongest case that Strauss was in fact the kind of philosopher he so movingly describes, the kind of man who cannot help but seek to uncover the truthfulness in every claim to truth and who, at the same time, must suspend his judgment about those claims that still remain unproved.

IV.

The third and final volume of *Collected Essays,* entitled *Human Rights, Virtue, and the Common Good,* brings together many of Fortin's writings on various concrete problems that confront the Christian religion in contemporary western democracies. Though at times somewhat repetitive, the essays in the book nonetheless offer believers and unbelievers alike invaluable moral and political guidance in thinking about Christianity's proper relationship to modern liberal democracy.[29] That Christianity has to reflect upon its relation to modern democracy underscores Fortin's point that as a transpolitical religion it is not wedded to any one regime and that whatever accommodations it makes to any particular regime should not require or entail the sacralization of that regime. Thus, any genuine effort on the part of Christians to clarify their religion's relation to liberal democracy requires an understanding of the nature of the regime as well as the effect that the democratic ethos has on the human soul. It is in this spirit and for these reasons that Fortin repeatedly defers to the wisdom and judgment of the great analyst of modern democracy, Alexis de Tocqueville. Throughout *Collected Essays,* Fortin suggests that every three hundred years or so Christianity needs men whose ultimate relation to Christianity is ambiguous, such as Dante and Cervantes, to explain the nature of the current social and political world to the Church. And as Fortin periodically suggests, presently the Western Church should take Tocqueville as her guide as she tries to find her place within the modern democratic order.

While Tocqueville is today frequently claimed by both the contemporary right and left, Fortin looks to him not to lend authoritative support for specific partisan positions but to cast light on the soul of man under the democratic dispensation. As Tocqueville noted, modern democracy is not merely a variation of classical democracy. Indeed, modern democracy cannot be understood simply from within the general framework of the more or less legitimate regimes articulated by Aristotelian political science. Inasmuch as it raises the principle of democracy, consent, to the level of the single legitimizing regulatory principle in human life, modern democracy effectively breaks with the classical notion of the natural cycle of regimes. In comparison to modern democracy, democratic Athens and republican Rome were both aristocratic regimes. The two worlds differ almost in kind and, as a result, the type of men that each tends to produce are "like two distinct kinds of humanity."[30]

The man that modern democracy seeks to bring into existence is not distinguished by any specific end or set of ends(HRVCG, 11, 31). Democratic man acts less for the sake of attaining a particular form of perfection as he does for securing the ever more complete acceptance of the twin democratic principles of freedom and equality. Democratic man knows that he is the possessor of certain natural rights, rights that secure his freedom and his equality in relation to other men. Yet democratic man also realizes that the natural rights that he possesses do not point to any natural end that he possesses. Democratic man is uncertain about his end in part because the regime in which he lives does not supply one for him.

According to Fortin, modern democracy is something of a mixed blessing for religion. It removes religion from the public sphere and relegates it to the private realm of civil society. The democratic state is in large part indifferent to the theological distinctions that separate various religions and it thus accords the same status to all religions. It views as equally valid any religion that does not impinge upon the life of the state and the rights of citizens. While religious toleration earlier was encouraged as a matter of sound political practice, democracy elevates toleration to the level of a universal principle. That modern democracy does not authorize the practice of any one

religion is of obvious benefit to the stability of the political order as well as to the religious freedom of individuals. Moreover, apart from curbing the threat of persecution on religious grounds, modern democracy's institutionalization of religious toleration also benefits religion, since men seemingly are "more devoted to a church or a religion that they have chosen of their own free will"(HRVCG, 10).

As has become increasingly evident, however, the problem is that by according the same status to all religions, modern democracy "implicitly denies that any of them has any intrinsic claim to this respect"(HRVCG, 11). Modern democracy silently and almost imperceptibly undercuts religion, inasmuch as it encourages its citizens to see their adherence to any one religion as the reflection of a somewhat arbitrary choice or historical accident. Under the influence of the democratic ethos, a man's religion becomes viewed as something subjective; one possible "value" among others. Accordingly, while modern democracy allows for the free exercise of religion in general, the lack of seriousness with which it takes any religion in particular steadily saps the vitality of the religious spirit and renders unlikely the possibility that great numbers of truly religious men will rise from its ranks.

As Fortin points out, the Catholic Church anticipated some of the problems that liberal democracy would pose to the Christian religion and therefore initially resisted the West's movement towards democracy. In part due to the religious difficulties that the Church faced as a result of the French Revolution and in part due to the political losses the Church suffered from the dissolution of the papal states, nineteenth-century Catholicism witnessed a resurgence of conservatism. More often than not, however, Catholic conservatism's response to these events was more reactionary than genuinely conservative. What many conservative Catholics desired was not simply a return to the *ancien regime,* but the reinstitution of a not thoroughly understood and therefore much idealized medieval Christendom. Confronted with the modern democratic movement, Catholicism longed for a bygone era when it was the authorized and supported foundation of the social and political order.

Such reactions, however, were not unchallenged. During the

same period, an increasing number of Catholic intellectuals began to realize that it may be in the Church's better interest to reconcile herself to the now monolithic democratic revolution. Recognizing that democracy's victory seemed to be fated and that liberalism's earlier attacks on Christianity had somewhat faded, men like Chateaubriand sought to strike a truce between the Church and democracy(HRVCG, 51). But to effect such a reconciliation, democracy had to be given a new pedigree. Catholic liberalism no longer viewed modern democracy simply as the brainchild of early modern political philosophy, but rather as an outgrowth of medieval Christian thought. The paradigmatic example of this new way of thinking was Lord Acton, who boldly, not to mention creatively, declared that the works of St. Thomas contain "the earliest exposition of the Whig theory of the revolution."[31]

But as Fortin repeatedly explains, the problem with the kind of conciliatory approach advocated in the nineteenth century by Acton and Chateaubriand and continued in the twentieth by Etienne Gilson, Jacques Maritain, John Courtney Murray, and John Finnis (to name only a few) is that it fails sufficiently to appreciate the radically anti-Christian and anti-classical foundation of the modern political science inaugurated by Machiavelli in the sixteenth century. Again, following Leo Strauss, Fortin believes that this political science originated in opposition to the "utopian" teachings of the classical philosophers and the Christian Church. According to Machiavelli, classical political philosophy and Christianity erred inasmuch as they underestimated the all-too-human character of human nature and thus placed excessively lofty moral demands on men. By insisting that the passions be subordinated to reason, classical philosophy as well as Christianity imposed an oppressive and ultimately destructive rule of moral virtue over human life. Each misguidedly spoke of an ideal that "is seldom, if ever, seen among human beings, most of whom habitually prefer their selfish interests to the common good of society"(HRVCG, 80). To liberate mankind from the tyrannical rule of moral virtue, Machiavelli unleashed a new science of human affairs, one that looked to "the effectual truth of the matter" and took its bearings not from how men ought to live

but from how men in fact live.

Machiavelli's new political science was quietly adopted by early modern philosophers who recognized that its practical utility could be ensured only if its notorious origins were passed over in silence. Hobbes thus quietly undertook the effort of moralizing Machiavelli in order to translate the insights of his new approach into a more palatable, but equally effective, doctrine that would provide civil society with a solid foundation. Appealing to a pre-moral fact, namely, the fear of a violent death at the hands of another, Hobbes claimed the primacy of the right to self-preservation, *the* basic human right, from which a series of natural laws that secured the freedom of the individual could be derived. The classical and the Christian insistence on the priority of duties to rights was reversed, making the latter the primary moral phenomenon and replacing a devotion to the common good with an appeal to self-interest. Human beings no longer were understood to be social or political animals as the Bible and Aristotle's *Politics* argued, but asocial beings who first existed in an abstract "state of nature" characterized by the war of all against all. Over time men came to see the utility in striking a contract with one another and thus entered into civil society to escape the constant dangers that threatened their physical well-being in the state of nature. Hobbes's political teaching itself soon would be moralized by Locke, who, on the basis of Hobbesian anthropology, grounded civil society not on the brutish fundamental right to self-preservation but on the outwardly more refined, yet in truth derivative, right to comfortable self-preservation. Contrary to the Christianized interpretations of modernity offered by many leading nineteenth and twentieth century Christian intellectuals, modern democracy had its roots in a rejection of both classical and Christian thought rather than in the working out of Biblical principles.

Fortin is particularly relentless in his efforts to point out how the American Catholic Bishops' naivete about the origins of the modern natural rights doctrine often skews their judgments on political issues and contributes to the politicization of the Christian teaching. As a result of its refusal to confront the tradition of political philosophy, the tradition of Catholic social thought has grown

decreasingly political and increasingly egalitarian and moralistic in character. During the past forty years the Roman Catholic Church gradually has moved away from its traditional approach of addressing moral and political concerns in terms of natural law and increasingly stress the newly discovered requirements of "social justice." A notoriously vague notion invented by an obscure nineteenth century moral theologian named Taparelli d' Azeglio, the term made its first official appearance in Pius XI's papal encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno* in 1931. Contrary to what its name suggests, social justice, as heralded in Church documents, is not strictly speaking a virtue. "Its proper object is not the right order of the soul but the right order of society as a whole"(HRVCG, 273). Its proponents understand the greatest problems currently plaguing the West, the chief in their view being the plight of the poor, not to be the result of actions taken by individual men, but the effects of impersonal and often unseen societal structures. What is needed is greater equality in all aspects of human life, economic and moral, through the increased recognition of the rights of the individual in a democratic society. In the end, "there is one and only one just social order, whose broad outlines are prescribed in advance" and whose actualization would make the need for wise and prudent legislators superfluous (HRVCG, 274).

The problem with the theory of social justice is that like the majority of modern liberal thought it understands justice in terms of the perfection of a depersonalized social order and not of the human soul. By reducing the desire for justice to the securement of bodily needs, e.g., self-preservation or comfortable self-preservation, it forsakes all nobler concerns for justice. Moreover, it makes justice, undoubtedly an important and necessary virtue, the sole virtue and, in so doing, ignores the fact that justice actually prepares the way for and makes possible the exercise of other, higher forms of virtue. Worse still, in turning away from a concern with individuals and the virtuous or vicious actions they perform, the modern emphasis on social justice succeeds in politicizing the Christian teaching. When societies and not men are seen principally to stand in need of perfection, the Gospel is transformed from a call to personal

conversion into a vehicle for social change.

In contrast to the progressive and internally limited approach championed by social justice thinkers, Fortin advocates a two-pronged approach for addressing some of the problems that mark life in democracy. The first is undeniably Tocquevillian in spirit. Throughout *Human Rights, Virtue, and the Common Good,* Fortin repeatedly discusses the need for contemporary political scientists to reflect upon and speak to democracy as sympathetic critics (HRVCG, 17, 44, *258,* 311). Fortin suggests that in the wake of the collapse of the former Soviet Union, the greatest danger facing democracy comes from within, namely, the threat created by democracy's uncritical and irresponsible defenders. In an attempt to befriend democracy, such men actually flatter democracy. What democracy currently needs, according to Fortin, is not so much dogmatic partisans or sophisticated, if less than honest, official interpreters, but Tocquevillian political scientists "who could both defend it and tell us how to improve it"(HRVCG, *258).* Such political scientists would moderate democracy from within democracy, employing its strengths to mitigate, but never wholly eliminate, its inherent weaknesses.

As regards the Catholic Church, Fortin cautiously advises that Church officials should back away from issuing statements directly related to specific policy concerns and instead emphasize the transpolitical character of the Christian religion. To be sure, Fortin does not advocate that Bishops and theologians refrain from addressing many of the evils that presently beset Western society, but that they do so in a way that offers moral and spiritual guidance to individuals and is not excessively preoccupied with policy prescriptions and social change. By so doing, Bishops and theologians would help to reverse, or at least to stay, the ongoing "demise of transcendental Christianity" (HRVCG, *310)* and thus "recover a truer sense of [the Church's] social mission"(HRVCG, *259).* As Fortin impishly points out to Christians on both the left and the right, Christianity as a religion is concerned with the redemption of souls, not with societal institutions or even "cultures". By resisting both progressive and reactionary temptations and setting forth its own positive

teaching about man, "Christianity remains true to itself, while playing a salutary role in moderating the tendency inherent in liberal democracy...to make itself the sole principle of the human quest for happiness."[32]

The final essay in the volume records Fortin's touching memorial to his friend and his teacher Allan Bloom. This is the one instance in *Collected Essays* in which Fortin allows his reader to view him not simply as a scholar or as a thinker, but as a human being. As Aristotle reminds us, a friend is another self, someone who holds up a mirror in which we see a partial image of ourself. This is not to say that Fortin only recognizes traces of himself in Bloom. On the contrary, Fortin admires virtues and characteristics in Bloom that he himself does not possess. Fortin, for example, informs us that Bloom had something of a curious interest in contemporary Catholic personalities, a trait that he evidently does not also share. To Fortin, Bloom was a figure who was at one and the same time larger than life and eminently approachable. He was someone who could introduce him to the dizzying heights of political philosophy and the intoxicating life of the city of lights. It is a tribute to the humanity of both men that they could enjoy sharing philosophic speeches as well as cosmopolitan and memorable meals. Theirs was a friendship that allows one to see that, contrary to what some of Bloom's more extreme Platonic formulations would lead one to believe, man is a being whose good is not found in the pleasures of the intellect alone.

V.

In an illuminating essay entitled "Reflections on the Proper Way to Read Augustine the Theologian," Fortin remarks that

> much of the appeal that Augustine holds for the modern reader stems from the fact that he was continually engaged in dialogue not only with his coreligionists but with the pagan world and above all with the great intellectual tradition of antiquity(BPC, 99).

A similar observation appropriately can be made about Fortin.[33] Indeed, whether it is in connection with the materialistic and

egalitarian pronouncements of the American Bishops or with the texts that form the great tradition of political philosophy, it is the dialogic character of Fortin's thought that makes his essays attractive and compelling to the contemporary reader.

It is nevertheless precisely the form that this dialogue takes in some of Fortin's writings on the relation of Biblical faith to classical political philosophy that suggests an apparent contradiction between his thought and his action. Fortin clearly presents himself in a number of essays as a partisan of the "fruitful" dialogue that takes place between the teachings of Biblical revelation and those of classical political philosophy. Several of his writings point to neither the theological nor the philosophic way of life, but rather a life that lives the "fundamental tension" that lies "at the heart of the so-called `Great Tradition"'(CCPO, *295).* Such a life, however, ultimately seems incompatible with Fortin's theoretical claim that the Bible and philosophy represent the two great alternatives for the human soul, the two claimants between which every serious man eventually must choose. For the man who is a partisan of the fundamental tension, strictly speaking, is not identical to either "the philosopher open to the challenge of theology or the theologian open to the challenge of philosophy."[34] Fortin sometimes describes living a kind of life that he at other times argues is theoretically incoherent, perhaps even impossible.

I believe the reason why these two apparently irreconcilable positions are present in Fortin's writings becomes clear once one takes into consideration the character of the intellectual climate in which he finds himself. By advocating a life that in some way lives the tension between Biblical faith and classical political philosophy Fortin provides a calculated, timely response to what he, following Strauss, calls "the crisis of our time."[35] The crisis of which Fortin speaks refers to the current paralyzing inability of *modern* Western civilization, originally the joint product of the tension between Jerusalem and Athens but now based extensively on principles derived from modern philosophy and science, to believe any longer in its purpose, not to mention its superiority. Most fundamentally, the inability of the West to maintain faith in its *raison d'ētre* arose out

of the collapse of modern rationalism into irrationalism or nihilism. Due to the steady dissemination of vulgarized forms of Nietzsche's philosophy throughout the democratic societies of the West, Western man grew incapable of believing in the possibility of any claim to truth, let alone the claims made by the alleged self-evident truths that undergird his social and political institutions. Having become disenfranchised from reason, Western man has become disenchanted with the social and political world reason had helped to produce.

It is against this backdrop that Fortin recommends living the tension between the Biblical and the philosophic ways of life. Inasmuch as the partisan of the "fundamental tension" becomes an active participant in *both* sides of the unfinished debate between Jerusalem and Athens, he provides a consistent and ongoing response to the intellectual and political threat posed to the West by nihilism. By championing the finally irresolvable nature of the dialogue between the Bible and classical philosophy, the partisan of the tension is able to show that "the claims of Reason and Revelation are inherently untouched" (CCPO, 295) by the criticisms leveled against them in the name of modernity. In this respect, the faithful character of the Biblical way of life and the zetetic skepticism characteristic of classical philosophy stand as one in opposition to modern rationalism's dogmatic claim to have superseded them both.[36] In other words, Fortin initially becomes a partisan of the "fundamental tension" to defend the dual possibility of philosophizing and theologizing in our time as well as to show that Western civilization need not give up on itself because of its confrontation with nihilism.

That Fortin becomes a partisan of the fundamental tension in order to provide an initial, prudential response to the contemporary assault on reason by irrationalism can be seen in his more "theological" writings. These studies, the majority of which are published in *The Birth of Philosophic Christianity,* are less concerned with emphasizing the radical difference between the Biblical and the philosophic ways of life than they are with using philosophy to gain a better appreciation of the teachings of the Christian faith. But, in

so doing, Fortin does not recast philosophy back into its role as the handmaiden of theology, the servant who speaks only when spoken to and then only utters words her mistress wants to hear. Rather than employing a tamed "philosophy" to explicate the revealed teachings of the faith, Fortin juxtaposes the original, unadulterated, and undomesticated teachings of past philosophers with the Christian revelation so that the radical import of the latter can come to light more clearly. Fortin's theological writings thus serve a dual purpose. On the one hand, they allow modern Christians to understand better the premodern character of the revealed teachings of the Christian faith; on the other hand, they satisfy "the legitimate curiosity" of the Christian whose mind "has been previously... alerted to the existence of problems of which [his] less learned fellows barely have any inkling"(BPC, 101). In this respect, it is not an exaggeration to say that Fortin's theological writings entail something of the "noble risk" that characterized the writings of the Church Fathers.

Nevertheless one cannot help but notice that the tone of Fortin's theological writings is markedly different than the tone that is struck in the works of the ancient Christian writers. The Christian authors upon whose works Fortin comments, Clement of Alexandria, St. Basil, St. Augustine, Arnobius, and St. Thomas, all to greater or lesser degrees speak recognizably as Christians in their writings. Even the irreverent Dante that Fortin masterfully exposes comes across as a Christian in his Comedy-perhaps too well for Christianity's good, Fortin suggests. Such an unmistakably Christian tone rarely rises to the surface of Fortin's essays. To be sure, there are a few notable exceptions to this rule. For example, in a review of Hugo Rahner's *Greek Myth and Christian Mystery* Fortin remarks that Rahner helps to

> illustrate what the Church itself does when in its liturgical and sacramental catechesis it continues to clothe its teachings in symbols borrowed from the world of nature or from Old Testament history... By the same token, [he] suggests the type of effort that must be made today if Christianity is to become incarnate in the emergent civilization that it is once again called

upon to redeem(BPC, 328).

But given the infrequency of such statements in Fortin's writings, the overall impression one gets when reading his works is that they are the reflections of someone who hovers above Christianity, i.e. , of someone who comments on Christianity from above rather than from inside. As a result, the reader is led to wonder why Fortin has chosen to remain relatively silent about the distinctively Christian elements of his thought.

One plausible reason why Fortin does not speak in what many tend to associate with a traditionally Christian idiom is his awareness of the problem of rhetoric. This possibility is, in fact, suggested by Fortin himself in a remark he makes about Fredrick Withelmsen's book *Christianity and Political Philosophy.* Commenting on the inability to number any Christian thinkers among the ranks of recent outstanding political scientists, Fortin observes that "Christian scholars and theologians owe it to themselves to regain a foothold in an area which through contempt or neglect they have long since forfeited to others"(CCPO, 359). If in what concerns contemporary political science the first step for Christians literally is to get a foot in the door, then, prudence requires that the shared language of nature is used and not the sectarian language of the Gospel. Whether or not the current intellectual and political atmosphere would allow contemporary Christian political scientists to combine the two languages is a further question. Fortin for his part seems to deny the present feasibility of any such combination by his own unwillingness to do so.

While this reluctance could be construed as either the implicit admission of a veiled Averroistic dimension to his thought or the necessary silence that must accompany a covert project to reintroduce specifically Christian themes into political life, neither of these suspicions finally does justice to the kind of quiet reserve that marks Fortin's thought and faith. Such a reserve is foreign to both the clandestine Averroist and the clandestine theocrat. Rather it is more characteristic of a serious, thoughtful Christian who is reserved about explicit public proclamations of his faith. If it is difficult for us

to recognize such a man, perhaps it is because they are so rarely encountered today.

Related to the question of the remarkably understated Christian elements of Fortin's thought is the question of the role that political philosophy ultimately plays in his writings. Is political philosophy, strictly speaking, the queen of the sciences? While the political character of political philosophy clearly allows one to gain an amazing degree of clarity and precision about the nature of human affairs, it at the same time necessarily limits the scope and achievements of the political dimension of the science. Political philosophy as *political* philosophy eventually raises questions about the nature of human life that political life cannot answer adequately on its own terms. Stated differently, at some point political philosophy self-consciously points to the insufficiency of the merely political horizon and thus to the need for the political perspective to give way to a more all-encompassing form of reflection. The aim of this latter kind of reflection, however, is no longer simply to deliberate about the various possibilities available to man within political life, but to come to a better understanding of the nature of the larger whole of which both man and political life are parts.

Fortin's engaged reader is thus forced ultimately to raise the question of what is the all-encompassing science that informs his reflections on human affairs. That this question needs to be asked is suggested by Fortin himself in his introduction to the three-volume collection. He there states that a "common feature" in his essays "is the prominence (and *in some sense,* the primacy) accorded to political philosophy"(BPC, xiv italics added). Fortin accordingly invites his reader to question in what sense political philosophy is not accorded primacy in his writings, as well as to speculate as to what science is. As a consequence, the reader, once again, is moved to ask why Fortin has chosen to be reticent about the kind of science that truly plays the architectonic role in his thought.

The preceding remarks are in no way meant to obscure the remarkable brilliance that shines in these essays. On the contrary, they are merely intended to draw attention to a few of the tensions inhering in Fortin's writings that make his *Collected Essays* such a

fertile ground of study. That there are tensions to be found in Fortin's thought seems entirely appropriate. Indeed, it seems difficult to image how the thought of such a dialectical thinker could be free from such tensions. For to be free from all tensions requires the possession of a complete and coherent system, a possibility or prospect that Fortin allows his reader to see neither classical philosophy nor the Bible offers to man.

Moreover, by providing tensions of his own and presenting those of others, Fortin has pointed out the direction in which further reflection should occur. And for this, his readers, particularly his Christian readers, must be grateful.

Marc D. Guerra
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NOTES

1. Ernest L. Fortin, A.A., earned his bachelor of arts degree from Assumption College in Worcester, Massachusetts (1946), his licentiate from the Angelicum in Rome (1950), and his doctorate in letters from the Sorbonne (1955). In addition, he did post-doctoral work at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes in Paris as well as at the University of Chicago. During the time he was at the University of Chicago, Fortin attended the classes of the late Leo Strauss(d. 1973). It was in Professor Strauss's classes that Fortin first was introduced to many of the themes that later would come to animate his own investigations, e.g., the primacy and indispensability of political philosophy, the forgotten quarrel between the ancients and the moderns, the irreducible tension that exists between philosophy and Biblical faith, and the practice of esoteric writing by past authors in the Western tradition. Fortin returned to Assumption College in 1955 to found the college's political science department, in which he taught until his departure from the school in 1970. From 1965 to 1972, he regularly taught at Laval University, the academic home of the great twentieth century Thomist Charles De Koninck. Beginning in 1971, Fortin taught in both the theology and political science departments at Boston College in Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts. His

publications include *Christianisme et Culture philosophique au cinquieme siecle: la querelle de 1' ame humaine en Occident* (Paris, 1959); *Medieval Political Philosophy: a Sourcebook,* edited with M. Mahdi and R. Lerner (New York, 1963); *Dissidence et philosophie au moyen age: Dante et ses antecedents* (Paris and Montreal, 1981); *Dantes Gottliche Komodie als Utopie* (Munich, 1991); and *Augustine: Political Writings,* edited with D. Kries (Indianapolis, 1994).

2. Differing descriptions of Fortin's thought include Shadia Drury, "Reply to My Critics" *The Vital Nexus* 1 (May, 1990), 127-129; E.A. Goerner, "Communications" *Review of Politics* 45 (July, 1983), 443-445; Frederick Wilhelmsen, *Christianity and Political Philosophy* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1978), 209; James V. Schall, "The Place of Augustine in Political Philosophy" *The Political Science Reviewer* 23 (1994), 144-145 and 154-155; Kenneth Hart Green, *Jew and Philosopher: The Return to Maimonides in the Jewish Thought of Leo Strauss* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 181; Ralph McInerny, *Aquinas Against the Averroists: On there Being Only One Intellect* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1993) 214; and Glenn Hughes, "The Strauss-Voegelin Correspondence: Two Reflections and Two Comments" *Review of Politics* 56 (Spring, 1994), 354-357.

3. For a penetrating discussion of why such an approach to the political and philosophical writings of the Western tradition is needed today as well as the limitations of such an approach, see the chapter entitled "Natural Right and the Historical Approach" in Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953) 9-34; the essay is reprinted in Leo Strauss, *An Introduction to Political Philosophy: Ten Essays by Leo Strauss* ed. Hilail Gilden (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), 99-124.

4. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America,* the Henry Reeve text, rev. Francis Bowen, ed. Phillips Bradley, vol. 2 (New York: Vintage Books, 1990) 329.

5. St. Jerome, Letter 141to Augustine (Migne, *Patrologia, Series Latina) 22.* Col. 1180.

6. A provocative underlying theme in Fortin's account of the refounding of Christianity is the degree to which the decaying state

of the Roman empire helped to secure the success of the project. Fortin, at times, implies that St. Augustine recognized that the impending collapse of the Roman empire would afford Christianity a golden opportunity to replace the social and political universalism of Cesarean Rome with the spiritual universalism of Christian Rome. Given that the empire had accustomed men to think about themselves as members of a whole that transcended the distinctions of any one particular city, it served as a propaedeutic for preparing them to accept Christianity's teaching on the universal brotherhood of men. Fortin suggests, in other words, that St. Augustine realized that on the social level the collapse of civic universalism would allow for the spread of religious universalism. Nietzsche makes a similar observation in section 201 of *Beyond Good and Evil.*

7. Related to this observation, it is important to note the role Fortin sees Cicero playing in St. Augustine's education. Commentators regularly observe that in his *Confessions* St. Augustine remarks that Cicero's *Hortensius* first awakened him to the theoretical life. Apart from this observation, most commentators have little to say about Cicero's influence on St. Augustine's thought and are more apt to emphasize the role the Neo-Platonists, such as Plotinus and Porphyry, played in St. Augustine's philosophic education. While Fortin does not deny this Neo-Platonic influence - one merely has to read the description of the ladder of love in the *Confessions* to see it, he stresses the degree to which St. Augustine's moral and political astuteness is indebted to Cicero. Along similar lines, some of the most original observations in Fortin's essays on St. Augustine explain the distorting influence that Neo-Platonism has had on modern scholarship's understanding of Plato's own philosophic teaching. Fortin shows that by abstracting from both the political and dialogic character of the Platonic dialogues the Neo-Platonists attributed to Plato a dogmatism that is foreign to his works.

8. Shakespeare's portrayal of the Christian tinker Christopher Sly at the opening of *The Taming of the Shrew* vividly captures this dimension of the Christian religion. When the discussion turns to politics, Sly quickly becomes bored and informs those at the alehouse that they should "let the world slide" and discuss other

matters. See Shakespeare, *The Taming of the Shrew,* Induction, scene 1, line 6.

9. St. Augustine, *Letter* 155 to Macedonius, vol. III (Washington, DC: The Catholic University Press of America) 305.

10. Text as in St. Thomas Aquinas, *Expositio super librum Boethii de Trinitate expositio proemii,* ed. Bruno Decker (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1955) 49.9-15.

11. Plato, *Republic,* 414c.

12. Though his essays on "Christian esotericism" do not raise the question directly, Fortin does invite his reader to wonder whether and to what extent the Church Fathers employed esoteric writing to avoid censorship from intellectually inferior or reactionary ecclesiastical authorities. The question is not simply of historical interest. For a discussion of the present-day relevance of this question, see (HRVCG, 63-72).

13. Dante, *Inferno,* IV. 131.

14. See Aristotle, *Politics,* 1323a14-1325b31.

15. Fortin sees the obvious political implications of this shortcoming as shedding light on the reason why Aristotle's *Politics* eventually came to play such a pivotal role in the social and political life of the Christian West. The *Politics* offered a complete and coherent account of political life to which one could appeal in grappling with the fractious problems that necessarily plague political life. By emphasizing the natural, as opposed to the divine, origins of the city, the *Politics,* at least in principle, allowed Christians to draw sharp distinctions between political and ecclesiastical authorities. With the help of the *Politics,* the Christian West would chart a middle course between theocracy and caesaropapism, striking an at times uneasy truce between temporal and spiritual authorities but one that nevertheless injected a degree of freedom into public life. For an unparalleled treatment of this matter as well as discussion of the manifold problems related with the project, see Fortin's brilliant essay "Politics and Philosophy in the Middle Ages: The Aristotelian Revolution"(CCPO, 177-197).

16. St. Augustine, *De Libero Arbitrio,* I. 6.15.

17. See Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History,* 163-164; "On

Natural Law" *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983) 141-143; *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988) 95-98; Harry V. Jaffa, *Thomism and Aristotelianism* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1979) 167-188.

18. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles,* III, 6. St. Thomas further states that God sometimes permits this to happen because "He considers such things to be...a hindrance to virtue and divine judgment."

19. In advancing such criticisms of St. Thomas's natural law teaching, Fortin not only follows Strauss and Jaffa, but medieval Christian thinkers like Marsilius of Padua and Ockham. Whereas Marsilius criticized St. Thomas's natural law teaching on philosophic grounds similar to those taken by Strauss, Jaffa, and Fortin, Ockham's reservations about the teaching were more theological in nature, claiming that its universal principles would impose limits on God's freedom. See, for example, (CCPO, 229-232).

20. See, St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae,* I-II, 101, 1 and 104, 1, ad 3um.

21. Along these lines it is worth noting that the recent papal encyclical that seeks to defend the soundness of St. Thomas's natural law teaching radicalizes the doctrine inasmuch as it imputes to St. Thomas the notion of "the absolute validity of moral negative precepts, which oblige without exception"(Veritatis *Splendor,* II. 97). Jaffa rather disingenuously presents the kind of overly specific and inflexible natural law doctrine that the Catholic social scientist John Courtney Murray sets forth as representative of the Thomistic position. See Jaffa, 200, n.20. One need only cite Murray's attempt to synthesize the classic natural right teaching of Aristotle, the natural law teaching of St. Thomas, and the modern natural right teaching of Locke, however, to see that he is not simply a pure representative of St. Thomas's thought.

22. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae,* I-II, 94. 5. In addressing the moral teaching of the Old Law, i.e., the teaching he identifies with the content of the general precepts of the natural law, St. Thomas also observes that "some matters cannot be the subject

of judgment without much consideration of the various circumstances, which all are not competent to do carefully, but only the wise"(I-II, 100. 1).

23. Thomistic moral theologians frequently attempt to strike a balance between these two approaches by appealing to the so-called "principle of double effect". While the principle does provide a way of a deliberating about moral and political actions that steers clear of the trappings of an absolutist approach to natural law thinking, it nonetheless only vaguely resembles an appeal to prudential judgment. Inasmuch as the principle of double effect provides strict guidelines that are to be followed when faced with difficult moral and political decisions, it reveals a typically modern almost Kantian quest for precision and certainty in moral and political matters that is foreign to the older view of the virtue of prudence.

24. For the clearest expression of this argument see Thomas Pangle's introduction to *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983) 10-26. Pangle's position is criticized by Harry Jaffa, who perhaps overstates the distinctiveness as well as the rationality of Biblical revelation in the thought of Leo Strauss. See *Claremont Review of Books 3,* no. *3* (Fall *1984)* 14-21 and 4, no. 1 (Spring 1985) 18-24. For a balanced attempt to mediate between these two positions see David Lowenthal's excellent review of *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy* in *Interpretation* 13, no. *2* (1985) *297-320.*

25. See the chapter entitled "Maimonides as Philosophical Theologian" in Kenneth Hart Green, *Jew and Philosopher: The Return to Maimonides in the Jewish Thought of Leo Strauss* (New York: State University of New York Press, *1993) 67-92* for a clear statement of this argument.

26. For a thoughtful calling into question of the human tenability of this position see Werner Dannhauser, "Athens and Jerusalem or Jerusalem and Athens?" *Leo Strauss and Judaism: Jerusalem and Athens Critically Revisited,* ed. David Novak (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996) 155-171.

27. See St. Thomas Aquinas, *Expositio super librum Boethii De Trinitate,* II, *3.*

28. Allan Bloom, for example, states that Strauss was a "philosopher" and that his concern with Judaism was an expression of his idiosyncratic personal concerns. See Allan Bloom, "Leo Strauss" *Giants and Dwarfs* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988) 235-255. Stanley Rosen goes significantly further in stating that Strauss kept up an "exoteric flirtation with the Hebraic tradition"(Hermeneutics *as Politics* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1987] 17).

29. While *Collected Essays as a* whole is both ably edited and well produced, one cannot help but wish that *Human Rights, Virtue, and the Common Good* was edited somewhat differently. Apart from the problem of repetition, one wishes that the editor had paid less attention to the "timelines" of the essays in the volume and more attention to their relation to the collection as a whole. To take but one example, though the essay entitled "The Bible Made Me Do It: Christianity, Science, and the Environment" obviously addresses the currently vogue issue of environmentalism, the essay most fundamentally belongs in *Classical Christianity and the Political Order,* the volume that takes up the question of the nature of nature. In fact, the essay contains what is arguably the best treatment of the similarities and the differences between the classical and the Christian understandings of nature to have been written in recent years.

30. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America,* vol. 2, 333.

31. Lord Acton, "The History of Freedom in Christianity" *Essays in the History of Liberty* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1985) 34.

32. Ernest Fortin, "Thomas Aquinas as a Political Thinker" *Perspectives on Political Science 26* (Spring, 1997) 96. For a brilliant exposition of this position, see Pierre Manent "Christianity and Democracy" *Crisis* 13 (February, 1995) 46-48.

33. One striking feature of Fortin's "Reflections on the Proper Way to Read Augustine the Theologian" is that the essay sometimes reads as an indirect commentary on his own work. Indeed, the reader who is familiar with Fortin's thought cannot help but notice that Fortin here seems to provide clues as how best to approach his own writings as much as he performs the same service for the writings of Augustine. See, in particular, (BPC, 99,101,and 104).

34. Leo Strauss, "Progress or Return?" in *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism,* ed. Thomas L. Pangle (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), *270.*

35. See, for example, BPC, xvii-xviii; CCPO, *295; 337-353;* see, also, Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, *1964),* 1-12; "The Crisis of Our Time" in *The Predicament of Modern Politics* ed. Harold J. Spaeth (Detroit: University of Detroit Press, 1964), *41-54.*

36. It is interesting that in Fortin's presentation it is primarily the zetetic skepticism of classical philosophy that permits one to see that modern rationalism leaves the fundamental claims of reason and revelation untouched. Fortin points out that classical philosophy, in contrast to modern rationalism, acknowledges that it cannot disprove the possibility of revelation; hence, classical philosophy admits that it cannot know with Cartesian certainty that the account of the whole given by the Biblical revelation is demonstrably untrue. One should note, however, that in Fortin's account classical philosophy leaves open the question of revelation in general, i.e., the skepticism of classical philosophy does not defend the possibility of one particular revelation, but of revelation *tout court.*