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# The Politics of (Jewish) Revelation

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Samuel Fleischacker, *Divine Teaching and the Way of the World: A Defense of Revealed Religion*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. Pp. x + 559.

Michael Walzer. *In God's Shadow: Politics in the Hebrew Bible*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2012. Pp. xxi + 232.

JEWISH THINKERS HAVE LONG UNDERSTOOD that the benefits of equal citizenship in modern, secular states are not without cost. In modern Europe, Jewish emancipation was contingent upon the dissolution of Jewish communal autonomy and the abandonment of Jewish national identity. It is a scholarly commonplace that Judaism—which promiscuously mingled religion, culture, and nationality in the Middle Ages—became a “religion” in modernity.<sup>1</sup> When scholars contend that Judaism became a religion, they mean that, for the first time, Judaism was conceived not as a source of authority in all spheres of life but as a practice confined to a discrete sphere (namely, the private sphere of ritual and belief). With this reconceptualization, Jewish thinkers adopted (in some cases consciously, in others not) a Protestant definition of religion. In other words, the transformation of Judaism from an idiosyncratic hybrid into a standard issue “religion” was the price of admission to equal citizenship in modern, secular society. Judaism’s political dimensions had to be jettisoned as ostensible obstacles to the Jews’ civic integration.

In recent years, political theorists who study secularism have come to appreciate what Jewish thinkers have long understood about the price of admission to secular citizenship. Secularism’s promise of toleration relies on a distinctive notion of what religion is and how far its jurisdiction extends. The conviction that it is possible to erect a neutral public sphere,

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1. See Leora Batnitzky, *How Judaism Became a Religion* (Princeton, N.J., 2011), 1–7.

and that norms of public neutrality do not curtail the free exercise of religion, rests on the premise that religion is private, a matter of individual belief. If this premise is not universally shared, however, the secular public sphere begins to look a lot less neutral. Indeed, the claim of neutrality begins to look like a disavowal, a failure to acknowledge that, as one of modernity's authoritative discourses, secularism exerts formidable power, establishing norms of appropriateness for public discourse, religiosity, and even personhood. Convinced that secularism places unequal burdens on citizens with holistic faith commitments, many political theorists have begun to question the strict "wall of separation" approach. Determined to "take religion seriously," these scholars argue that secularism must be refashioned . . . allowing greater latitude for religious discourse and symbols in the public sphere, for example—to accommodate a broader spectrum of religious practice and commitment. Relaxing strictures on public religious discourse would actually enrich pluralistic debate, these theorists contend, because it would allow atheists and theists alike to affirm the metaphysical convictions that inform their political views.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, in response to projects, such as Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*, that ascribe a distinctive (and, from Taylor's perspective, impoverished) phenomenology to secularity, committed secularists have sought to recast secularism as a spiritually rewarding way of life. For these theorists, secularism is not only a rationalist campaign against mythology and superstition. Secularism is also a positive ethos, and it must be defended as such.<sup>3</sup>

The books under review—Samuel Fleischacker's *Divine Teaching and the Way of the World: A Defense of Revealed Religion* and Michael Walzer's *In God's Shadow: Politics in the Hebrew Bible*—demonstrate that, in a moment when scholars are eager to rehabilitate religion, Judaism's political dimensions still present a stumbling block for certain kinds of secularists. Fleischacker and Walzer ask whether revealed religion can accommodate secular politics, and, if so, whether it must be reconfigured in the process. Each author identifies religious sources for pluralism, liberalism, and secularism—although Fleischacker offers a more emphatic and wholehearted defense of revelation. Denying that fealty to revelation entails dogmatism or authoritarianism, Fleischacker and Walzer are part of the broader movement within political theory to restore religion's dignity.

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2. See William E. Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist* (Minneapolis, Minn., 1999), 4–6, 39.

3. For one example, see Philip Kitcher, "Challenges for Secularism," in *The Joy of Secularism: 11 Essays for How We Live Now*, ed. G. Levine (Princeton, N.J., 2011), 24–56.

Moreover, Fleischacker presents his brief for revelation, colored as it is by “Jewish commitments,” as a corrective to “the strong Christian bias that otherwise dominates most scholarly discussion of religion” (p. 12).

As scholars sensitive to the many forms that religion has historically taken and the many ways it has articulated with politics, Fleischacker and Walzer might be expected to embrace some version of postsecularism. Yet neither one of them joins the growing chorus of scholars calling for secularism’s reconfiguration. Fleischacker and Walzer rebut Enlightenment aspersions against revealed religion, developing new stories about the sources of secular politics, but neither author challenges received notions of the *kind* of politics that count as secular. Indeed, Fleischacker and Walzer both identify Judaism’s idiosyncratic theological-political arrangements as impediments to secular politics. To establish revelation’s compatibility with secularism, Fleischacker must define a religious community as a voluntary association of like-minded individuals (as opposed to a nation or an *ethnos*). In a somewhat different vein, Walzer reads the Hebrew Bible as the narrative of an apolitical nation. On Walzer’s interpretation, the imposing figure of divine sovereignty is the prime obstacle to developing the Bible’s secular, pluralist strands. Thus, for all their caution regarding the mismatch between Greek and Christian categories and Jewish practice, Fleischacker and Walzer still find certain Jewish theological-political arrangements hard to embrace. Reading these brilliant, compelling books, one is put in mind of the trade-offs that accompanied Jewish emancipation. For theorists who endorse an unreconstructed secularism, Judaism’s political dimensions prove hard to fathom as anything other than a recipe for theocracy.

This vexed relationship to facets of Judaism that do not fit into received categories stems, in part, from Fleischacker’s and Walzer’s delicate negotiation with Enlightenment traditions. To redeem revelation from the aspersions of its Enlightenment critics, Walzer and Fleischacker adopt strategies devised by the Enlighteners themselves. As Fleischacker reminds readers, Enlightenment’s philosophical architects (such as Hume, Smith, Kant) did not reject religion wholesale. Rather, eighteenth-century philosophers sought to extract religion’s moral core (“natural” or “rational” religion) from the dross of superstition, supernaturalism, and enthusiasm. If Walzer and Fleischacker deny that revelation consigns its partisans to intellectual and political tutelage, they reach this conclusion by making a series of distinctions that, like those of their Enlightenment forbears, rely on criteria external to revelation itself. Fleischacker’s primary goal is to isolate a “*defensible*” or “acceptable mode of religious faith” from its indefensible and unacceptable counterparts—namely, those that

deny “the legitimacy of modern science and modern, secular morality” (pp. 18, 19). In a similar vein, Walzer’s argument rests on a distinction between “normal politics,” which are alarmingly scant in the Hebrew Bible, and “abnormal politics,” which are abundant (p. 68; see also 17, 19, 67, 69, 71). As these distinctions reveal, Fleischacker and Walzer see taming revelation’s incendiary potential and normalizing its unruly deviations as prerequisites for its contemporary rehabilitation. Significantly, their respective containment strategies recall the canonical Enlightenment “solutions,” introduced in Spinoza’s *Theologico-Political Treatise*, to the Jewish Question. Fleischacker echoes Spinoza’s individualism: his acceptable revealed faith accommodates secular politics because it is not itself political. By contrast, Walzer’s rhetoric of normalization recalls Spinoza’s “Zionist” impulses. Precisely because they accord revealed religion greater dignity than did Spinoza, Fleischacker and Walzer offer a vivid illustration of the constraints imposed by a Spinozist frame.

Curiously, these constraints are narrower in the text that, at first glance, appears to be the more traditional of the two, Fleischacker’s *Divine Teaching*. This monumental work is both a tightly reasoned philosophical opus and an impassioned testament to the author’s practice as an observant, but liberal, Jew. In *Divine Teaching*, Fleischacker sets out to establish the possibility of “a properly *religious* liberalism, a liberalism that grows out of religious commitment” (p. 19). Against Enlightenment philosophers who dismiss fealty to a revealed text as a recipe for complacency, obedience, and dogmatism, Fleischacker contends that such fealty is eminently justified. Taking guidance from a sacred text proves philosophically defensible and consonant with liberal values because, on Fleischacker’s view, revelation’s jurisdiction does not extend to science, morality, or politics. To treat revelation as a source of transparent, publicly shared norms is to misunderstand the faculties it addresses (namely, imagination) and the kind of allegiance it solicits (namely, reflective love). Revelation’s distinctive purview is, rather, to imbue our lives with meaning. Life is bound to feel pointless, Fleischacker warns, without revelation—for life’s value cannot be established by reason alone. Sounding like a Jewish Charles Taylor, Fleischacker laments the poverty of secular ethics even while he endorses separation of religion and state.

How does an ardent, self-consciously unfashionable defender of (Jewish) revelation end up abandoning the notion that revelation addresses and constitutes a political community? It is only by defining revelation as an antidote to *individual* malaise that Fleischacker can develop a religious justification for pluralism, liberalism, and secularism. Defined in these

terms, Fleischacker's revelation begins to look a lot less traditional. What, one might wonder, is "religious" about the claim that life's value is a matter for faith, not reason? After all, acknowledging reason's limits does not commit one to embrace Orthodox Judaism. Many philosophers acknowledge the role that faith plays in their ethical orientations—yet they subscribe to naturalistic ethics.<sup>4</sup> As a pluralist, Fleischacker is willing to count these nontheistic paths as revealed religions. In principle, a work of art, such as James Joyce's *Ulysses*, can function as a revealed text, offering a consoling "vision of the world as beautiful" (p. 276). In practice, however, few artworks have yielded "a set of practices and norms by which" their "moral-beautiful vision can infuse and structure our daily lives" (p. 281). Fleischacker's defense of revelation is liberal, then, in that it embraces the possibility of multiple revelations. (*Divine Teaching* defends the form of revelation, rather than the propositions affirmed by a given revealed text.) Significantly, the logic behind Fleischacker's pluralist defense of revelation echoes that of Spinoza's frontal assault on revelation. In the *Theologico-Political Treatise*, Spinoza says that a text is sacred if it inspires piety, and it only remains sacred so long as it inspires piety.<sup>5</sup> With the contention that "there may be different, equally true revelations"—and that *Ulysses* may be one of them—Fleischacker endorses Spinoza's functionalist logic (p. 401).

Thus, a liberal defense of revelation appears to vindicate nonrational faith commitments, rather than the proposition that God has communicated norms and narratives supernaturally. Yet Fleischacker vacillates regarding whether "defensible" revelation is a hermeneutic process of meaning-making, or a metaphysical process of reality's self-disclosure. At times, Fleischacker writes as if God alone can satisfy our desire for meaning, beauty, and ceaseless fascination. "A God is necessary," Fleischacker contends, to bring about "a vision of a maximally good world and a path for humanity to earn a place in it" (p. 278). Fleischacker strikes a similarly pious note when summarizing the book's "central point": "To defend the idea, contra Kant, that 'It is written' can be a good basis on which to make some of one's main choices in life" (p. 39). Here, Fleischacker appears to derive revelation's authority from its divine imprimatur. If revelation is a supernatural event, "the reach of a supernatural being or force into the natural order," then the mere fact that "it is written" is enough to secure our deference (p. 281). On closer inspection, however,

4. For one example, see Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist*.

5. See Spinoza, *Theologico-Political Treatise*, trans. S. Shirley (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; Indianapolis, Ind., 2001), 146.

Fleischacker's revelation does not appear to require supernaturalism, for it is *humans* who class ethically resonant texts as authoritative "writings." In most of Fleischacker's examples, it is *we* who do the reaching. Revelation answers questions we pose, responds to needs we feel, and meets our "telic expectations" (p. 372). In the Bible, revelation comes out of nowhere and issues (frequently unsettling) commands. "The Lord said to Abram, 'Go forth from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you'" (Gen 12.1). In Fleischacker's hands, by contrast, revelation is a "balm" that assuages anxiety, nihilism, boredom, and depression (p. 430). And, in a Heideggerian twist, this balm is applied at human initiative: we must make the "effort" to let "givenness occur" (p. 296). A stance that we adopt rather than a call that we hear, Fleischacker's revelation scarcely displaces the human perspective.

I note Fleischacker's equivocation regarding the source of revelation's authority to highlight the anthropocentrism of his apologia. Although Fleischacker asserts the superiority of theism as an ethical path, his revelation is not, ultimately, about God. Rather, it is about humanity, about our need to love the world. More precisely, revelation is about *me*—about how I alleviate the fundamental tedium of human existence. In keeping with the state of nature device employed in the book's first part, Fleischacker takes individual angst, rather than the horizon of a faith community, as his point of departure. "Religious revelation is given in the first instance to individuals" (p. 462). Fleischacker's individualism is a condition of possibility for his religious liberalism. If revelation answers the individual's search for meaning, then religion's jurisdiction does not extend to politics, which, properly speaking, is an arena for Rawlsian public reason. Moreover, membership in a religious community is voluntary, and the community has religious significance only because it provides a context for individual ethical fulfillment. Granted, "there is no revealed religion without a path," and no path without a community, yet communal ties are nonbinding (p. 361). If observing the mitzvot does not imbue my life with joy, fascination, and purpose, I am under no obligation to uphold them. (Here, again, Fleischacker echoes Spinoza.) By taking this route to what John Rawls called "political liberalism," Fleischacker risks leaving readers with the impression that it is actually quite hard to reconcile revealed religion, of a traditional Jewish kind, with Enlightenment values.

If, as Fleischacker contends, *Divine Teaching* "is a very Jewish book," the story it tells is yet another rendition of Judaism's transformation into a religion at the hands of modern liberalism (p. 12). Indeed, Fleischacker's unreconstructed secularism prevents him from delivering the prom-

ised Jewish rejoinder to prevailing theories of religion. On the evidence of *Divine Teaching*, a liberal defense of revelation can embrace Jewish hermeneutics and the priority of ritual to doctrine, but it cannot accept the notion that Jews constitute an ethnos, nation, or polity. Readers convinced that religious individualism is a necessary bulwark against theocracy are likely to find this argument compelling. Readers disinclined to accept Enlightenment terms of debate may consider the loss of Judaism's political dimensions a high price to pay for the rehabilitation of nonrational faith commitments.

Writing about the Bible, a text that portrays the Israelites as a nation, Walzer holds onto the notion that Jewish religion is a collective phenomenon. Yet Walzer still finds something wanting, from a "pragmatic and secular" perspective, about Jewish attitudes toward politics (p. 55). With *In God's Shadow*, a characteristically elegant meditation on biblical political discourse, Walzer laments the Bible's failure to envision this collective in properly political terms. To Walzer's chagrin, "politics, secular, everyday politics, the management of our common affairs, is not recognized by the biblical writers as a centrally important or humanly fulfilling affair" (p. 186). The prime obstacle to an appreciation of mundane politics, according to Walzer, is God. More accurately, "the powerful idea of divine sovereignty" is what explains the Bible's profound indifference to politics (p. 202). When figured as something other than a sovereign—as the author of a legal code, for example—God can inspire forms of pluralism that give "modern liberal and democratic readers reason to admire the biblical legislators" (p. 22). When figured as a king, however, God thwarts the development of anything that these readers would recognize as "political." Thus, *In God's Shadow* is less a call for God's elimination than for God's remove.

Keeping God at a distance, and thereby making space for secular politics, is especially challenging for Jews. Unlike the Greeks, who invented the discipline of political theory, the biblical authors do not recognize "an autonomous or distinct political realm," "an activity called politics," or "a status resembling citizenship" (p. xii). Moreover, this political innocence persists within rabbinic Judaism, due in part to the biblical legacy, in part to the Jews' history of statelessness. (Walzer depicts rabbinic deliberation as a this-worldly practice that cannot generate a full-fledged political culture, given the Jews' lack of sovereignty.) Politics fails to achieve the requisite dignity in the Hebrew Bible, Walzer argues, because it transpires under the shadow of an omnipotent God. "There is a strong anti-political tendency in the biblical texts, which follows from the idea that God is a 'man of war' (Exodus 15:3) and a supreme being—so what is



there for human beings to do?" (pp. xii–xiii). If Fleischacker's Enlightenment paragons scorn Judaism as overly political, Walzer worries that Hebrew (and, later, Jewish) thought is not political enough, because not properly political. In Walzer's judgment, "antipolitics" is a Hebraic signature.

Walzer is right to highlight a strand within biblical discourse that is suspicious of human agency, and to eye this strand warily. As he has in his earlier, path-breaking studies of Jewish political thought, Walzer trains his skeptical glance on traditions that make it hard for contemporary Jews to think politically, at a moment when such thinking is ever more urgent. When Walzer brands the Hebrew Bible "antipolitical," however, he risks forgetting his own acknowledgment that "antipolitics is a kind of politics" (p. xiii). Biblical assertions of divine sovereignty only register as *opposition* to politics if one accepts a Greek definition of politics. Why not read the conviction that sovereignty is a divine prerogative as an alternative, Hebraic conception of the political? Granted, a conception of politics that accords "the relation of God and Israel" absolute priority over "the relation of rulers and ruled" will likely prove unconvincing to many contemporary readers (p. 204). Yet Walzer too hastily dismisses as "abnormal" passages that depart from the Greek model. As a result, he scants the possibility that divine sovereignty can create space for politics that are neither quietist nor apocalyptic.

On Walzer's reading, quietism and apocalypticism are the twin liabilities of Hebraic antipolitics. Reserving agency to God, messianic discourse confirms "the power of the powers that be," because it leaves humans nothing to do but wait (p. 184). At the same time, messianism has left a legacy of political recklessness—for "activists possessed by a messianic faith are cut loose from all the normal constraints on political action" (p. 184). Making politics part of God's jurisdiction, the Hebraic approach proves dangerous, for "it is not in heaven" is "the principle on which politics necessarily rests" (p. 212). Like Fleischacker, then, Walzer contends that revelation can only accommodate secular politics if it is not itself political.

Yet there are moments, scattered through the text, where Walzer appears poised to acknowledge that "abnormal" politics can be admirable. As Walzer acknowledges, the figure of divine sovereignty reinforces the notion that human kings "serve human purposes" and, as such, lack "cosmological status" (p. 60). Here, the contention that sovereignty is a divine prerogative encourages, rather than impedes, the "normal" politics of deliberation, calculation, and compromise, for it places salutary limits on the jurisdiction of human kings. When Walzer allows that divine over-

sight can facilitate mundane politics, he echoes Spinoza, who argues that the ancient Hebrew theocracy was actually a democracy.<sup>6</sup>

Walzer does not develop this Spinozist line of argument, perhaps because it would align him with Martin Buber, whom he dismisses as a pacifist. Instead, Walzer holds fast to a distinction between kings, who practice “a form of normal politics,” and prophets, who “defend an abnormal politics that is sometimes admirable and sometimes not” (p. 68). Wedded to this distinction, Walzer tacitly endorses “normalization” as the lone path for a vital (and sane) Jewish politics. To cite Samuel, whose appointment of a human king marks “the dawn of politics or of political understanding in Israel,” the Jews must become “like all other nations” if they want to constitute a proper and vibrant political community (p. 66; 1 Sam 8.5). Walzer’s eloquent brief for the “sensible,” the “conventional,” the “ordinary,” and the “everyday” is a salutary counter to Jewish chauvinism (pp. 68, 11, 186). Yet, saturated as it is with suspicion of the unconventional, this counterweight comes at a cost—namely, the loss of a richer, because less conventional, conception of politics. Although Walzer uses insights from political theory to revise our view of revelation, he does not use biblical insights to revise our understanding of what counts as political, or as secular. With Fleischacker, Walzer predicates an embrace of the secular on a transformation in Hebrew and Jewish self-understanding.

To say that Fleischacker and Walzer encourage a transformation in Jewish self-understanding is not to press an objection against them. As they so ably demonstrate, Jewish discourses are multiple, dynamic, and historically contingent. My point is not to enshrine a particular set of theological-political arrangements as authentically Jewish but rather to challenge the assumption that, to envision a politics palatable to contemporary sensibilities, we must jettison theological-political arrangements that appear idiosyncratic from an Enlightenment perspective. If liberal regimes of toleration exhaust the possibilities for secular politics, then it is arguably true that Jewish secularists must embrace religious individualism. Yet liberal toleration is not the only form that secularism has taken historically. Nor is liberal toleration the only form that secularism can take. Liberal secularism rests on a controversial theory of religion, a controversial theory of politics, and a controversial theory of their interrelation. For scholars who recognize as much, it is no longer axiomatic that a God who addresses a community, and whose jurisdiction includes politics, is a dangerous God. Readers seeking a less “normal” and normalizing

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6. See *ibid.*, 190.

account of political religion might look to Martin Buber, who develops the (alternative) Spinozist line of argument that Walzer neglects. In his Zionist writings, Buber reminds readers, “we [the Jews] exist only because we dared to be serious about the unity of God and his undivided, absolute sovereignty.”<sup>7</sup> Here, to affirm divine sovereignty is to insist on Judaism’s political dimensions, even while asserting that Jewish nationality must find expression through pluralist political arrangements, arrangements that accommodate Palestinian claims. Holding onto the notion that the Jews’ relationship to God is both political and paramount does not preclude the possibility of human political agency, or democracy. Neither quietist nor messianic, Buber envisions a theological-political Judaism that challenges Enlightenment notions of what counts as political, and as secular, without falling back into authoritarianism. As Buber demonstrates, individualism and normalcy are not the only bulwarks against forms of religious oppression that the Enlighteners worked so hard to eliminate.

These gripping, accomplished books rebut the Enlightenment slander that revelation is a tissue of benighted superstition. Yet they do not dispel Enlightenment suspicions about the dangers of political religion. Readers partial to the “abnormal” are liable to come away from these books convinced of the need for a modern rehabilitation of Judaism as an emphatically political religion. That Fleischacker and Walzer provoke such a response is one measure of their immense achievement.

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7. Martin Buber, *A Land of Two Peoples: Martin Buber on Jews and Arabs*, ed. P. Mendes-Flohr (Chicago, 2005), 103.