Leo Strauss and Catholic Rationalism on the Nature of Philosophy and the Origins of Modernity

My purpose is to compare Leo Strauss with Catholic rationalism with respect to two related themes – the nature of philosophy (especially its relation to religion) on the one hand and the origins and nature of modernity on the other. By Catholic rationalism, I mean an approach to the question of revelation which distinguishes what can be known through human reason alone from what can be known through revelation as understood within the Catholic tradition, but maintains that some truths which have been revealed can also be known through reason alone (e.g. the existence of the creator God and some of God's attributes), while data provided by revelation can be built upon rationally, so the relation between reason and revelation from the perspective of this tradition is complex and cannot be defined only through their separation. Catholic rationalism is most well-known through the Thomistic tradition, but there are also many Catholic rationalists who are not Thomists.

Strauss presents himself as recovering ancient Greek philosophy and as subjecting modernity itself to analysis and critique. These projects are related, because powerful strands of modern thought claim that any return to a pre-modern conception of philosophy is impossible. Many thinkers regard this doctrine as naïvely triumphalist. However, the rejection of progress is often accompanied by the rejection of rationalism as such. Furthermore, critics of progress often regard modern rationalism as *rationally* superior to its ancient or medieval equivalents, even when they reject rationalism itself. Strauss, then, is engaged in a project analogous to that of Thomists and other Catholic rationalists who attempt to revive a harmonization of Greek philosophy with Biblical faith as offering a *rational* alternative to modern, post-Enlightenment thought. However, while Catholic rationalism maintains that reason and revelation, while distinct, are ultimately harmonious, Strauss maintains that they represent alternative ways of life; although a religious believer is not necessarily a thoughtless fanatic, a life cannot be religious *to the extent that* it is philosophical, and vice versa. Furthermore, Strauss regards Christianity, as a religion of dogma which is liable to confuse philosophy and religion, as potentially more pernicious in its effects than Judaism and Islam, which as religions of law are more likely to keep religion appropriately separate from philosophy.

Catholic thinkers often have an ambivalent relationship with Strauss; many have an uneasy feeling that although he is an important ally in the critique of modernity, there is also something essentially anti-Christian about his thought. My project aims to determine the proper relationship between Strauss and Catholic rationalism through a series of four articles. The Catholic partisans of Strauss do not recognize, or sufficiently acknowledge the implications of the facts, that he regards (a) revelation in general as a "challenge" to philosophy and (b) Christianity as a form of revelation which "perversely interweaves" philosophy with religion, as Judaism and Islam do not – two theses which Catholic rationalists cannot accept. However, Strauss' conception of philosophy as a trans-historical critique, in pursuit of the truth, of the conventions which structure any given political order is similar to that of Catholic rationalism. Furthermore, Strauss' account of modernity, as forecast, planned and encouraged by late medieval and early modern atheists , who recognized that a self-consciously secular society could be brought into being for the first time in history, concealing the extent of their revolutionary intent in order to advance it, is more consistent with Catholic doctrine than the influential view that atheism was impossible before the modern age and its mere possibility was produced unintentionally by sincere Christians who didn't realize that their writings would have a secularizing effect.