
Academics rarely make the national news; when they do, it is usually because they are tantalizingly postmodern, telling us naughty things like there is no truth (Richard Rorty, Stanley Fish) or that pigs may have more rights than mentally handicapped children (Peter Singer). When this happens, the coverage is usually somewhat favorable; or at the least an effort is made, in the interests of journalistic objectivity, to abstain from any real judgment.

All of this was upended in 2003, when a wave of journalists and pundits accused the political philosopher Leo Strauss of being the posthumous “godfather” of the Bush administration’s reputed neoconservative, warmongering imperialism, and for being (gasp!) postmodern. The accusations at times bordered on the hysterical, reaching an apogee with the actor Tim Robbins’ “Embedded,” a play that includes fascist neo-cons saluting each other with “Hail, Leo Strauss!”—this in reference to a Jewish refugee who had fled the Holocaust.

While the sensation died down fairly quickly (the New York Times issued a retraction of sorts near the end of the year, though without acknowledging its own pivotal role in fanning the misinformation), lingering suspicion of Strauss’s thought has remained. In response to this, several articles and books defending Strauss, mostly written by his former students (and in one case, by his daughter), have gradually begun to surface. Among these generally cogent apologias, it would be difficult to find one more painstakingly even-handed, detailed, and comprehensive than Michael and Catherine Zuckerts’ The Truth About the Leo Strauss: Political Philosophy and American Democracy.

Before they tell us the “truth” about Strauss, the Zuckerts first uncover the origins of the 2003 smear campaign. They trace it to, of all people, perpetual presidential candidate Lyndon LaRouche, who vehemently condemns Strauss as subhuman for his anti-progressivist reading of Plato (LaRouche, it turns out, fancies himself to be something of an authority on Plato). The real scholar behind LaRouche’s rants, however, is Shadia Drury, a professor who has built her career on condemning Strauss as a Nietzschean, a charge she substantiates with a curious blend of acute insights, astonishing oversights, and downright falsehoods.

Once the palate has been cleared of Strauss’s detractors, the Zuckerts then move to the man himself. Part I of The Truth is devoted to
explicating Strauss’s ambitious and multiform project: the resuscitation of classical political philosophy as a lens into the crisis of our time and as a tool for remedying it. In particular, Strauss strove to refute Heidegger, whose radical historicism both precludes the possibility of political philosophy and paves the way for totalitarianism in the political arena. Almost all of the topics for which Strauss is famous—e.g., his juxtapositions of ancients and moderns, Athens and Jerusalem, philosophers and poets—can be understood in light of his protracted quarrel with Nietzsche’s most brilliant and dangerous student.

Strauss, we thus learn, is no “postmodern” thinker, if by that we mean someone who, like Heidegger or Derrida, is working within the parameters of Nietzsche’s solution to the problem of modernity. Etymologically, however, this also makes Strauss the only true postmodern, for unlike Nietzsche etc., whose horizons are cast by modern philosophy, Strauss goes beyond modernity by going behind it, to the ancients. The Zuckerts are particularly adept at showing how Strauss endeavored to peal away centuries of conventional wisdom about Socratic philosophy in order to see it with fresh eyes. Hence one of their most illuminating chapters is on Strauss’s understanding of esoteric writing, an area of his thought that for some time has been greatly misunderstood, even by some of his students. The Zuckerts’ critique of fellow Straussian Stanley Rosen, for example, is fascinating.

The more central focus of the Zuckerts’ study, however, is Strauss’s complicated attitude towards America, which can be summarized in three tension-ridden propositions: 1) America is modern; 2) modernity is bad; 3) America is good. Strauss does not hesitate to locate the American founding within the Enlightenment, and he does not hesitate to suggest that the Enlightenment, all told, was a failure. Yet Strauss also acknowledges much that is good in America, for the country continues to be sustained by pre-modern residues such as religion and is partially constituted by healthy classical principles such as the rule of law. Strauss, writing mostly during the Cold War, was also quick to defend America against Heidegger’s claim that there was no real difference between modern liberal democracy and totalitarianism.

The Zuckerts’ three propositions also form the backdrop against which they can evaluate what they call “Straussian geography,” the subject of Part II. As it turns out, the three main schools of thought among Strauss’s students—East-Coast, West-Coast, and Midwest—are distinguished by their underemphasis of one of the propositions. East Coast Straussians (such as Allan Bloom) downplay America’s goodness, West Coast Straussians (such as Harry Jaffa) America’s modernity, and Midwest Straussians (such as Martin Diamond) modernity’s badness.
The Zuckerts themselves are Midwest Straussian, though this does not prevent them from offering a fair-minded assessment of all three camps. Indeed, one of the most conspicuous features of the Zuckerts’ writing is their moderation, both in their style and in their conclusions.

From this valuable overview two things become fairly certain. First, there is no such thing as a unified “cabal” of Straussian, an often heard charge. Second, if Straussian have anything in common, it is the pursuit of the serious academic study of political philosophy as a viable alternative to positivism and historicism. As a whole they are not interested in shaping policy, and their link to neo-conservative thought, to draw a scholastic distinction, is more accidental than substantive.

One species of Strauss-inspired scholar that does not appear in this taxonomy, however, is that of the religious believer. The authors originally proposed a section entitled “Faith-Based Straussian” in order to highlight the work of Strauss’s students in Christian, Jewish, and Islamic thought, but the editor was by this point worried about length and having too extensive a discussion on the pupils instead of the teacher.

While such concerns are understandable (the book is as already a meaty 320 pages), this was, in my opinion, an unfortunate decision. Not only does it deprive us of more information on half of the Athens-Jerusalem equation so crucial to Strauss’s thinking, it would have provided a much-needed corrective to the widespread perception of Straussian as crypto-atheists. Strauss is famous for his formulation of the divide separating Athens and Jerusalem, but this does not mean that he was hostile to religion or that his thought cannot serve as a productive point of departure for theological reflection, regardless of whether one agrees with it. It would have been instructive to hear how believing scholars like Fr. Ernest Fortin or Pierre Manent have wrestled with Strauss’s thought in this area.

Perhaps, however, this lacuna is fortuitous, for it leaves the religious reader to wrestle with Strauss on his own, like Jacob with the inscrutable angel. And for that matter, perhaps the 2003 tempest in a teapot is fortuitous as well. Regardless of the merit of the accusations against Strauss, they have forced his admirers to explain to a broader audience his meaning and intention. Understandably, Straussian had been more eager to talk about the great thinkers to whom Strauss had directed their attention than Strauss himself. But the recent slander has robbed them of this luxury, prompting them to articulate more explicitly the import and value of their teacher’s legacy.

Formed in this crucible of pseudo-scandal, The Truth About Leo Strauss is one such response, yet it is my sense that it will far outlast the
controversy that begot it. This valuable and serious guide to Strauss’s thought, relevance, and impact should be read by all who wish to deepen their understanding of the intellectual crisis of the West and the estimable twentieth-century scholar who devoted his life to its diagnosis.

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For more than 2,000 years, the Catholic Church has done more to shape history than any other institution in the world. Yet, as those of us who teach Catholic Studies know well, it has been difficult to find an accessible, comprehensive history of the Church itself. And, it is becoming even harder to find a history that both acknowledges the contributions of the Church to society and focuses on the controversies.

Joseph A. Varacalli’s *The Catholic Experience in America* is that history. It is an affirmative look at the social history of the Church, yet it does not back away from some of the challenges that the Church has faced—including the clergy abuse crisis of the past decade, the growing secularization of her colleges and universities, and the negative response of many progressive Catholics to her teachings on birth control, abortion and homosexuality. In all areas, Varacalli assumes that the normative standard is defined by the Church’s magisterium, her official teaching authority—yet he points out that “millions of Catholics in the United States have been either supremely indifferent, hostile, or selectively accepting of that authority” (xx).

While acknowledging these controversies, Varacalli focuses on identifying the events, issues, philosophical positions, and the trends that have made up the experience of being Catholic in America. A cheerful Catholic, he writes with a genuine affection for the Church—yet avoids a facile triumphalism. While Varacalli, a founder of the Society for Catholic Social Scientists, is steadfast in his loyal support for the magisterium, he is also fair in presenting the not-so-loyal opposition.