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Article abstract

In this paper I first (§ 2) examine the metacriticism of modern critique of religion that Strauss formulates in his first book on Spinoza (1930). According to this early interpretation by Strauss, Spinoza undertakes a metaphysical critique of religion in order to confute the ontological possibility of divine revelation (or 'miracle thesis'). Spinoza's attempt, however, ends in an aporia: the ultimate presupposition underlying belief in revelation remains irrefutable. In the § 3 I examine a text published by Strauss shortly afterwards (1935), in which I detect a self-critique of his earlier meta-criticism of modern critique of religion. Strauss become aware here that his own understanding of Spinoza's aporia is itself aporetic. It is in this aporia, in my view, that we must look for the key to understanding what Strauss would call retrospectively (1962) his own 'change of orientation' and, consequently, his discovery of 'philosophical exotericism.'

APORIAS OF THE MODERN METAPHYSICAL CRITICISM OF RELIGION IN LEO STRAUSS'S EARLY INTERPRETATION OF SPINOZA'S THEOLOGICO-POLITICAL TREATISE

PIERPAOLO CICCARELLI

1. The Two Aporias: Strauss's Early Metacritique of Spinoza's *Critique of Religion* (1930) and His Later Self-Critique (1935-1962)

I would first like to clarify the title of my paper: *Aporias of the Modern Metaphysical Criticism of Religion in Leo Strauss' Early Interpretation of Spinoza's Theologico-Political Treatise*.¹ This specific topic was inspired by the general topic of our symposium: the question of the relationship between 'religion and metaphysics' is in fact the main subject of Strauss's investigation in the book to which my title alludes (the so-called *Spinoza-Buch*, originally published in German in 1930 and then translated into English in 1965 under the title *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*).² Spinoza's modern metaphysics relates metaphysics to religion in a manner that is very different from ancient and medieval metaphysics. Whereas the latter occupies itself with harmonizing rational metaphysical knowledge of God with faith, in Spinoza the relationship takes the form of critique – more precisely, as Strauss calls it, 'radical critique'.³ The use of the adjective 'radical' by Strauss is not superfluous or arbitrary. The intention of radical criticism is suggested by the Latin etymon of the expression 'radical': *radix*, i.e., 'root' or 'origin'. Radical critique of religion is the grasping of the root out of which it arises. In this sense, as a 'radical' critique, the Spinozist critique of religion does not aim at a mere exclusion of

1. I would like to thank Marco D. Dozzi for his substantial revisions and discussions of my translation.

2. See Leo STRAUSS, *Die Religionskritik Spinozas als Grundlage seiner Bibelwissenschaft. Untersuchungen zu Spinozas Theologisch-politischem Traktat* (1930), in Leo STRAUSS, *Die Religionskritik Spinozas und zugehörige Schriften*, Stuttgart-Weimar, Metzler, 2008, pp. 3-361; Leo STRAUSS, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, transl. by Elsa M. SINCLAIR, New York NY, Schocken Books, 1965. Henceforth cited as *Religionskritik* 1930, followed by the page numbers of the German and then the page numbers of the English edition in brackets.

3. See *Religionskritik* 1930, p. 214 (165).

religion, but first attempts to understand it: i.e., it attempts to *include* it in a wider context of meaning. In other words, it is an *immanent* critique. And it is precisely this radical or immanent intention that explains why, according to Strauss's *Spinoza-Buch*, the critique of religion must necessarily take a metaphysical form in Spinoza's thought. I will return to this point in §2, when I will introduce the distinction made by Strauss between the 'positive' critique of religion and the properly 'metaphysical' critique.

Before explaining this distinction between positive and metaphysical critique, I will have to finish explaining the title of my paper: "*Aporias* of the Metaphysical Critique of Religion." I use the plural 'aporias' for a very specific reason, since there are two distinct aporias that I aim to highlight. The first aporia is the one in which, according to Strauss, Spinoza's metaphysical critique of religion becomes entangled. According to Strauss's 1930 book, Spinoza undertakes a radical metaphysical critique of religion and yet he does not 'reach' his goal. Strauss uses this exact verb: 'to reach'.⁴ It is therefore an 'aporia' in the etymological sense of the Greek expression *aporia*: Spinoza cannot find the *poros*, i.e. the 'passage' that allows him to reach the root of religion. One could therefore say that, in the 1930 *Spinoza-Buch*, Strauss carries out a 'metacritique' of Spinoza's critique of religion. Although Strauss does not use this expression, it seems to me that it helps to clarify his basic stance in this early book.

However, there is another aporia that I would like to highlight. This aporia does not concern Spinoza's critique, but Strauss's own meta-criticism of Spinoza's critique. It is not long before Strauss himself notices this aporia, since he already lets it appear in a text published in 1935, the Introduction to *Philosophie und Gesetz*.⁵ He reiterates it even more clearly thirty years later, in the *Preface* he wrote in 1962 and appended to the 1965 English translation of his early *Spinoza-Buch*. In this *Preface* he writes:

The present study was based on the premise, sanctioned by a powerful prejudice, that a return to premodern philosophy is impossible.⁶

This is evidently a self-critical assessment. Its meaning, however, is not as evident. One may ask: why does Strauss qualify the 'premise' (or even 'powerful prejudice') that his book is based on in terms of an 'impossibility'? Here

4. See *Religionskritik* 1930, pp. 168-169 (124), 248 (195).

5. See Leo STRAUSS, *Philosophie und Gesetz. Beiträge zum Verständnis Maimunis und seiner Vorläufer* (1935), in Leo STRAUSS, *Philosophie und Gesetz - Frühe Schriften* (Gesammelte Schriften Band 2), Stuttgart-Weimar, Verlag J.B. Metzler, 2013, pp. 6-123; Leo STRAUSS, *Philosophy and Law: Contributions to the Understanding of Maimonides and His Predecessors*, transl. by Eve ADLER, Albany NY, State University of New York Press, 1995. Henceforth cited as *Introduction* 1935, followed by the page numbers of the German and then the page numbers of the English edition in brackets.

6. *Religionskritik* 1930, p. 54 (31).

(§3) I will try to defend the following answer: the impossibility that Strauss speaks of is none other than an aporia. It is an aporia that resulted not only from his own efforts, but also from the efforts of numerous other modern, post-Enlightenment authors: namely, the attempt to subject Enlightenment criticism to a meta-criticism that aims at 'rehabilitating' religion and thus at opening the way to a *Religionsphilosophie* ('philosophy of religion' in the peculiar, post-Enlightenment meaning of such a title). The awareness of this aporia – i.e. the aporia he *himself* had stumbled into – led Strauss to seek a way of thinking about the relationship between philosophy and religion that was different not only from the one expressed by Spinoza's metaphysical critique, but also different from his own meta-criticism of that critique in the early *Spinoza-Buch*.

This alternative way of thinking is epitomized by the so-called 'exoteric-esoteric writing thesis,' the most distinctive mark of Strauss's mature work. This thesis is well-known in part because it is highly controversial: it is the thesis that the philosophers of the past – or as they are called in the *Preface* just quoted, the "heterodox thinkers of earlier ages"⁷ – wrote their books with a particular technique of 'writing between the lines.' It was a kind of deliberate attempt to make the philosophical content of the book comprehensible only to a small circle of readership: the 'potential philosophers.' According to this view, this method also served to disguise the subversive potential of philosophical thinking and to sway 'general' readers toward views that are necessary for the preservation of society (the majority of which, in earlier ages, were precisely religious views).⁸ What I intend to deal with here is only a segment of the history of Leo Strauss's thought and a segment in which one could say that Strauss had not yet become Strauss. Here I will deliberately not analyze what might seem to be a far more interesting aspect of Strauss's thought: namely, the way of thinking about the relationship between philosophy and religion that characterizes Strauss's mature work. I will leave it out, not only because it is a widely known and discussed topic, but also and especially because I am convinced that it is not possible to fully understand it without first understanding the aporia that compelled Strauss to formulate the 'exoteric-esoteric writing thesis.'

7. *Ibid.*

8. For a concise exposition of the 'exoteric-esoteric writing thesis,' see the first three pages of "On a Forgotten Kind of Writing" (1954), in Leo STRAUSS, *What is Political Philosophy? And Other Studies*, Glencoe IL, The Free Press, 1959, pp. 221-232.

2. Spinoza's Attempt at a Metaphysical Critique of Religion and its Failure

I now turn to the distinction Strauss makes between *positive* and *metaphysical* critique of religion. In order to understand what positive criticism it is, one must consider what Strauss regards as the main polemical objective of Spinoza's critique of religion: namely, the theological *Wunder-Behauptung*, or 'miracle thesis,' according to which God can operate in nature by suspending its laws.⁹ The centrality of this thesis for biblical religion in particular is evident: that God works in a miraculous way is in fact presupposed not only by the miraculous events narrated in the Bible (including, of course, the account of the creation of the world), but it is also presupposed by prophecy – which, as Spinoza states at the beginning of the *Theologico-Political Treatise*, is nothing but 'revelation' itself.¹⁰ Finally, it is also presupposed by faith in God's justice, whose providence rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked.¹¹

Now, the positive critique of the 'miracle thesis' that Strauss takes up as being ingredient in Spinoza's critique of religion consists in demonstrating that the miracle is not knowable as such. What is called a 'miracle' is nothing more than an event that cannot be explained and therefore appears as exceptional and fearful because its cause is not yet known.¹² The 'miracle thesis' should therefore be traced back to the emotional situation of fear. Human beings, frightened by natural events that are contrary to their expectations and which they cannot explain, seek refuge from fear using fantastical explanations: the event is thus conceived of as the punishment or reward from a mysterious power capable of governing the course of nature "for the sake of men."¹³ Such a positive critique of religion is thus also a form of radical critique in the sense that I specified at the beginning, for it traces the 'miracle thesis' back to its imaginative genesis. Imagination is the root from which springs the miraculous explanation of natural events. This explanation can also be called 'ethico-political' in a broad sense, for it represents God as a king who rules His subjects. This political sense of the 'miracle thesis' becomes crucial in the part of the *Theologico-Political Treatise* that deals with the state and the social function of religion (chapters 16-20). I will have to entirely omit this part from my discussion, but not without pointing out that it is precisely this political dimension of Spinoza's critique of religion that gives religion a positive and ineradicable function.

9. See *Religionskritik* 1930, pp. 167-194 (123-146).

10. Cf. Baruch SPINOZA, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, Cap. I (*De Prophetia*), § 1, p. 15 (ed. Gebhardt).

11. Cf. *Religionskritik* 1930, p. 243 (188).

12. See *Religionskritik* 1930, p. 182 (134); see also p. 261 (205).

13. *Religionskritik* 1930, p. 243 (188).

The point to be discussed here is the problem that, according to Strauss, inevitably arises for a positive critique of miracle. The fact that the 'miracle thesis' has its origin in the imagination acquires critical significance only if one assumes that the imagination has no epistemic value. It is only on the basis of this epistemological assumption – which has a Cartesian origin that Strauss discusses over the course of many pages¹⁴ – that Spinoza can make claims such as the one that the great imagination that distinguished the prophets from all other people was inversely proportional to their cognitive capacity.¹⁵ And so it is only on the basis of the Cartesian devaluation of the imagination that Spinoza can ultimately deny that there is any relationship between biblical revelation and the knowledge of God: this fulfills the main purpose of the *Tractatus*, which is to separate philosophy from theology.¹⁶ However, it is precisely this underlying assumption of positive criticism which allows us to understand that tracing the miracle thesis to its human imaginative root tells us nothing about the existence or non-existence of the object that is imagined. In other words, positive criticism can at best establish that an all-powerful and unfathomable God is inaccessible to human knowledge – it cannot prove His non-existence. To use Strauss's words, positive criticism remains a merely 'defensive critique,' which implies the "limitation, self-imposed on the positive mind, to what is accessible to exact observation and rigorous analysis."¹⁷ But – Strauss continues – such a 'self-limitation' confronts the unbeliever with very embarrassing radical objections from the believer:

Is that limitation not the work of human *defiance*, of convulsive self-closure? Is not the lack of receptivity to the call and grace, to the Law and benediction, a *deliberate choice* [*gewollt*]? (...). If the positive mind denies that it closes itself in defiance against revelation, it must confess that it does not itself experience revelation. In so doing, does it not admit that it lacks an organ, that it is blind? (...) Are unbelievers then to resign themselves to being 'ungifted in the matter of religion,' just as those who are unmusical are ungifted in the matter of music? If they accepted this, then they would already be validating revelation. Thus, a merely defensive criticism of revelation is simply not possible.¹⁸

According to Strauss, the difficulty just highlighted is at once the core and the stumbling-block of Spinoza's metaphysical or systematic critique of the miracle thesis. The purpose of this critique, as distinguished from positive critique, is to demonstrate not simply the *unknowability* of the miracle, but rather its ontological *impossibility*. This is, once again, a 'radical' critique – but it does not,

14. Cf. *Religionskritik* 1930, pp. 233-247 (181-192).

15. Cf. Baruch SPINOZA, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, Cap. I, §20, p. 21 and Cap. II (*De Prophetis*), §1, p. 28.

16. Cf. Baruch SPINOZA, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, Cap. I, §1, p. 29; Cap. II, §20, p. 44; Cap. XIII, §3, p. 168; Cap. XIV, §2, p. 174.

17. *Religionskritik* 1930, p. 193 (145).

18. *Religionskritik* 1930, pp. 193-194 (145, slightly modified translation).

however, remain a merely ‘defensive critique’ like the positive critique; rather, it goes on the offensive: it becomes – as Strauss calls it – ‘aggressive critique.’¹⁹ Now, what does Strauss mean by ‘aggressive critique’ and what distinguishes it from ‘defensive critique’? It is, so to speak, a strictly *immanent* critique: it intentionally places itself on the same plane as the criticized position; that is, it moves within the same perspective as the opponent. This explains why, in Spinoza’s attempt to establish the impossibility of miracles, he traces religion itself – and thus the very image of an unfathomable God – not merely back to human imagination, but to the infinite power of God. In other words, within the framework of Spinoza’s metaphysical critique of religion, the very image of an unfathomable God turns out to be, like everything else, a finite mode of the infinite divine substance. The same is true of the whole ‘religious illusion,’ which, from the point of view of positive criticism, instead appears as nothing more than a human error.

In Spinoza’s metaphysical critique of religion, therefore, we are dealing with a genesis that is not simply anthropological, but ontological; more precisely, it is an *onto-theo-logical* genesis of religion. Strauss does not use the expression ‘ontotheology’ (a Kantian expression which Heidegger notoriously took up to designate the ‘constitution’ of all Western metaphysics²⁰) either in the early Spinoza book nor (*salvo errore*) elsewhere. However, it seems to me to be relevant here because it allows us to grasp not only what distinguishes metaphysical critique of religion from positive critique, but also the aporia in which, according to Strauss, the former becomes entangled. In this regard, it is important here to briefly note the role that the figure of Calvin plays in Strauss’s early book. Strauss interprets Spinoza’s *deus sive natura* as a kind of mirror image, and – for that very reason – as an inversion of Calvin’s theology. Calvin plays the part of a real deuteragonist – one far more important than Maimonides, to whom an entire chapter is also devoted. Although there is no philological evidence of Spinoza’s in-depth study of Calvin, Strauss supports the thesis that Spinoza not only had a marked “sympathy with [Calvin’s] doctrine of predestination,” but even believed himself to be “the logical culmination” [*konsequente Vollendung*] of such a doctrine, and thus the only one who “completely rejects the ‘Pharisaic’ doctrine of justification by works.”²¹ Spinoza’s absolute necessitarianism thus turns out to be a kind of radicalization of Calvin’s already radical interpretation of the biblical meta-

19. *Religionskritik* 1930, p. 247 (192); see also p. 261 (205). Strauss also refers to ‘metaphysical critique’ as ‘systematical critique’: see pp. 260-262 (204-206).

20. Cf. the 1957 conference *Die onto-theo-logische Verfassung der Metaphysik*, in Martin HEIDEGGER, *Identität und Differenz*, Frankfurt am Main, Klostermann, 2006, pp. 51-79; transl. by Joan STAMBAUGH: *The Onto-Theo-Logical Constitution of Metaphysics*, in Martin HEIDEGGER, *Identity and Difference*, New York NY, Harper & Row, 1969, pp. 42-74.

21. *Religionskritik* 1930, p. 258 (202, slightly modified translation).

phor that, in the presence of God, man is like clay in the hands of a potter.²² This radicalization is also an inversion of Calvinist doctrine insofar as Calvin aims to establish man's radical sinfulness, whereas Spinoza always conceived of man's dependence on God in such a way that it entails the denial of the human capacity to commit sin.²³

In the aforementioned Introduction to *Philosophie und Gesetz* published a few years after the *Spinoza-Buch*, Strauss reiterates this important point in his earlier interpretation of Spinoza's engagement with Calvin by making it one of the keys distinguishing features of the Enlightenment as such:

For this is precisely what characterizes the Enlightenment: In the name of supposedly or only ostensibly 'immanent' critique and the further development of tradition, it makes extremes within the tradition the basis of a position that is in fact totally incompatible with the tradition.²⁴

As an example of this peculiar inversion of meaning, Strauss cites Spinoza's justification of his own 'rejection of the Law' (*Antinomismus*) by appealing to the biblical statement that man in the hands of God is like clay in the hands of a potter.²⁵ However, it should be noted that by epitomizing this important point of his earlier book, Strauss gives it an entirely new meaning. As a careful reading of the above passage shows, Strauss is now cautiously putting forward a hypothesis that does not appear at all in the earlier book, but which is to become of central importance in Strauss's later studies on "the heterodox thinkers of earlier ages." This hypothesis is suggested by his use of the adjective 'angeblich,' i.e. 'apparent' – more precisely, 'ostensible' and therefore 'superficial' – when he refers to the 'immanent' character of Enlightenment criticism. On closer inspection, this implies that 'immanent,' i.e. 'aggressive' criticism is not intended to give expression to the author's actual view. Rather, it must be seen as a tactical moment in a more complex rhetorical strategy. This strategy involves the use of intentional contradictions: that is, it deliberately constructs aporetic and paradoxical arguments that are intended to strike the attentive reader and induce him or her to free themselves from their own prejudices.

In the 1935 Introduction, such a hermeneutical hypothesis vaguely anticipates the later 'exoteric-esoteric writing thesis' almost in the form of foreshadowing. However, as I have already noted, it is completely absent from the 1930 *Spinoza-Buch*. Far from seeing Spinoza's immanent reversal of Calvin as 'nur angeblich,' i.e. 'only ostensible,' or as a 'tactical move,' Strauss sees it as a self-deception of which Spinoza is the unwitting victim. It could thus be said that Strauss does in the 1930 book what he would later accuse historicism of

22. On the biblical image of man in the hands of God as clay in the hands of a potter, cf. Baruch SPINOZA, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, Cap. XVI, Adn. XXXIV, p. 264.

23. Cf. *Religionskritik* 1930, pp. 258-260 (202-204).

24. *Introduction* 1935, p. 13 (25, modified translation).

25. *Ibid.*

doing: namely, claiming to understand Spinoza better than he understood himself. Indeed, an entire paragraph of the book bears a title that seems to be intended to invert the very definition of the critique of religion: it is called “The Illusion of Critique”²⁶ Strauss here endeavors to explain not the illusion in which *religion* consists, but the illusion in which *the critique of religion* consists. That is, he subjects Spinoza’s critique to the same criterion of understanding to which Spinoza subjects religion: he considers it an illusion whose root must be brought to light. This is an eloquent proof of the meta-critical character of his reading.

What then is the aporia here? Why does Strauss think that Spinoza is under the illusion that he is radically criticizing religion, whereas in fact he cannot find the *poros*, the ‘passage’ that would enable him to reach its root? The reason is truly elementary: Spinoza simply has no understanding of the attitude of faith. Spinoza’s critique goes awry because he does not even “see the position which he sets out to refute”; as Strauss also says, he “talks past it.”²⁷ Spinoza’s God is simply not Abraham’s God. Even for the young Strauss, one could use the words that Heidegger would use years later in reference to God conceived of as *causa sui* in Western ontotheology: before Spinoza’s God, “man can neither fall on his knees in awe, nor can he make music and dance.”²⁸ Hence, the two theologies that come to clash in Spinoza’s metaphysical critique – Spinoza’s theology of the *deus sive natura* and the Calvinist theology of the unfathomable God –

(...) stand directly opposed to each other, without being able to arrive at an agreement or even at mutual toleration. [...] [*R*]evealed religion and theory fight their combat of life and death on the same plane as the one and eternal truth.²⁹

3. Strauss’s ‘Second Sailing’ toward the Reason-Revelation Issue as a Question about the Possibility of Philosophy

After having outlined the aporia in which, according to Strauss’s metacritique in the 1930 book, Spinoza’s critique of religion remains entangled, I now come to the examination of the other aporia, i.e. the one in which Strauss’s metacritique itself remains entangled. As I already noted at the outset, this aporia is

26. Cf. *Religionskritik* 1930, pp. 256-260 (200-204).

27. Cf. *Religionskritik* 1930, p. 263 (206, modified translation).

28. Martin HEIDEGGER, *Die onto-theo-logische Verfassung der Metaphysik*, p. 77 (72).

29. *Religionskritik* 1930, p. 251 (196, italics added). I italicized the last statement to draw attention to the tone of this almost bellicose account of the aporetic situation in which Spinoza – and, more generally, the Enlightenment critique of religion – remains entangled, which echoes the work of Carl Schmitt. This perhaps explains why Strauss shortly afterwards realized the inadequacy of his book on Spinoza precisely through his engagement with Schmitt. It also explains why, thirty-five years later, Strauss would add the 1932 essay in which this engagement took place as an appendix to the English translation of the book on Spinoza (see the bibliographical references on this point below, footnote 40).

outlined by Strauss himself: first in the 1935 Introduction to *Philosophie und Gesetz*, and then in the 1962 Preface to the American edition of the earlier book on Spinoza. Here I will deal mainly with the former text, mentioning only a crucial passage from the latter and leaving a more extensive discussion of it for another occasion.

Strauss published *Philosophy and Law* in order to apply for a professorship at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.³⁰ It is thus a distinctly 'Jewish' book, as is already testified by the praise of Maimonides with which the Introduction begins: "Maimonides's rationalism is the true natural model, the standard to be carefully protected from any distortion, and thus the stumbling-block on which modern rationalism falls."³¹ The book is largely devoted to Maimonides's conception of Jewish revealed Law. Strauss's attention to this topic is not surprising: indeed, it is well known that Maimonides has a place in Strauss's pantheon of authors. Less well-known, perhaps, is that just a few years earlier, Strauss had made a less than laudatory judgment of how Maimonides conceived of his own Jewish religious position. According to the early book on Spinoza, Maimonides failed to clarify the meaning of 'presence' that characterizes prophetic revelation and which distinguishes it from the 'presence' that is proper to scientific experience. While the latter aims to achieve maximum proximity with the object and is therefore driven by what Strauss calls "the will to immediacy" [*Unmittelbarkeit*], revelation on the contrary is driven by "the will to non-presence" [*Ungegenwärtigkeit*], to mediacy [*Mittelbarkeit*].³² "What is important," Strauss states by referring to Old Testament sources, "is that revealed religion essentially appeals to a fact that is *prior* [*vor*] to all human judgment, to the revelation made by God, the King of the world."³³ Revelation must therefore be understood as an absolute 'pre-giveness' (Strauss uses the technical phenomenological term '*Vor-gegebenheit*').³⁴ However, according to the early Strauss, the positive sense of the inherent *Vor-gegebenheit* of revelation is illuminated not by the *medieval* philosopher Maimonides,³⁵ but by the *modern* theologian reformer Calvin: more specifically, by means of his "doctrine of the inner witness of the holy spirit."³⁶

Now, one could perhaps read the entire *Philosophie und Gesetz* as a retraction of this negative judgement on Maimonides's way of understanding revelation and thus as a retraction of the importance Strauss had given to Calvin's

30. Cf. Heinrich MEIER, *How Strauss became Strauss*, in Martin D. YAFFE, Richard S. RUDERMAN (eds.), *Reorientation: Leo Strauss in the 1930s*, New York NY, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, p. 14.

31. *Introduction* 1935, p. 9 (21).

32. *Religionskritik* 1930, p. 230 (179).

33. *Ibid.* The biblical sources Strauss implicitly refers to are *Exodus* 20:18 and 19.

34. Cf. *Religionskritik* 1930, p. 247 (191) and 255 (199).

35. Cf. *Religionskritik* 1930, p. 255 (199); cf. also p. 247 (191-192).

36. Cf. *Religionskritik* 1930, p. 247 (192).

modern theology for understanding faith. Strauss – as one reads at the end of the Introduction – “sees [him]self compelled to ask whether Enlightenment is necessarily modern Enlightenment.”³⁷ We are thus faced with a veritable “change of orientation”: this is what Strauss himself calls it on the same page of the 1962 Preface I quoted at the beginning, immediately after stating that the book on Spinoza “was based on the premise, sanctioned by a powerful prejudice, that a return to premodern philosophy is impossible.”³⁸ The question concerning Strauss’s ‘change of orientation’ in the early 1930s has attracted the attention of many scholars.³⁹ For my part, I would like to contribute to this discussion by starting with a question that may seem elementary but is not easy to answer: *how* did this ‘reorientation’ take place? Is such a ‘shift’ perhaps the result of a personal preference that Strauss would have given at a certain time to some ancient and medieval authors over other modern and contemporary ones? It becomes immediately apparent that the question cannot be settled so easily when one notices the somewhat puzzling character of the 1962 self-critical statement about the 1930 *Spinoza-Buch*: Strauss does not simply state that the premise of this book was *his* personal modern orientation (in which case it would make sense to speak of his later preference for a different, no longer modern orientation); rather, he states that this premise was the *impossibility* of a return to premodern philosophy.

What does this mean? Does Strauss mean to say that he had not hitherto paid due attention to ancient or medieval authors? Or that he had not, for example, given preference to the worldview expressed by medieval philosophy nor formulated his rejection of the modern worldview as he should have done? But if so, then why does he talk about this matter in terms of impossibility? If the return to premodern philosophy is a matter of preference or choice, it must be possible *in principle*. My hypothesis is that by speaking instead of the impossibility of returning to premodern philosophy, Strauss means that modern philosophy was present in the *Spinoza-Buch* as a given and ‘non-thematical’ horizon – that is, as a ‘premise’ that could not be arbitrarily affirmed or denied, preferred or rejected. In fact, in the *Spinoza-Buch*, modern philosophy is not at all an object of preference. On the contrary, it is an object of harsh criticism: Spinoza’s modern attempt to refute revelation is judged as a failure. What Strauss actually undertakes in his early book is, as I have said, a *meta-critique of modern criticism*. However, modern philosophy remains *the uncircumventable horizon or background of this very metacritique of modernity*: this is the essential point of Strauss’s self-critical remark of 1962. My proposal, then, is to interpret his ‘change of orientation’ as an attempt to come to terms

37. *Introduction* 1935, p. 27 (38).

38. *Religionskritik* 1930, p. 54 (31).

39. See, for example, the collected volume *Reorientation: Leo Strauss in the 1930s*, cited above, note 30.

with the theoretical-systematical difficulty arising from such an impossibility of going beyond the horizon of modern philosophy.⁴⁰ Put differently – that is, Platonically – the ‘change of orientation’ can be seen as a kind of ‘second sailing’ (*Phaedo* 99c–d) that Strauss undertakes to get out of the aporetic situation in which he himself has gotten into in his early study of Spinoza.

So, having briefly discussed the 1962 Preface, let us return to the 1935 Introduction. The first thing to emphasize about this text is the autobiographical tone that characterizes its final pages, in which the aforementioned and somewhat startling question is raised as to whether “Enlightenment must necessarily be modern Enlightenment.” Strauss here refers to himself in the third person, as a

(...) Jew who cannot be orthodox, and who must consider purely political Zionism the only ‘solution of the Jewish problem’ that is possible on the basis of atheism – as an exit (*Auskunft*) that is indeed highly honorable but not, in earnest and in the long run, adequate.⁴¹

In describing the ‘present situation’ in this autobiographical way, Strauss also points out that it is “a situation with no way out” [*ausweglos*]: namely, an aporetic situation (in the etymological sense of the Greek word *aporia*). Such a situation can only remain aporetic or ‘without a way out,’ “as long as,” Strauss adds, “one clings to the modern premises.”⁴² Here it is not difficult to see an anticipation of what Strauss would say thirty years later in the passage of the Preface we have just commented on. But what kind of *aporia* is Strauss referring to in the 1935 Introduction? Here one must be careful, as the autobiographical tone of the passage – and especially the reference to Zionism – could easily lead to misunderstanding. One might think that, by speaking of the ‘present situation’ as a “situation without a way out” in 1935 (the year in which the Nuremberg Laws were enacted in Germany), Strauss is obviously referring to the tragical political situation of German Jews. However, as counterintuitive and perhaps surprising as it may seem, this is not the case here. In the passage we are commenting on, Strauss explicitly *denies* that the *aporia* he is dealing with is a *political* *aporia*. Indeed, he states that the ‘present situation’ – that is, once again, the situation in which he finds himself as a “Jew who cannot be Orthodox” – only ‘apparently’ lacks a political way out. He maintains that from a political point of view, there is indeed a way out: to

40. *Salvo errore*, Strauss first became aware of this ‘horizon character’ of modern philosophy in his 1932 essay on Carl Schmitt – more precisely, in its third section: without realizing this, the ‘change of orientation’ would not have taken place (cf. Leo STRAUSS, “Anmerkungen zu Carl Schmitt, Der Begriff des Politischen,” in Leo STRAUSS, *Hobbes’ politische Wissenschaft und zugehörige Schriften - Briefe*, Stuttgart-Weimar, Metzler, 2008, pp. 217-238, and my article “The ‘Concept of the Political’ in its Genesis. The Unpolitical Schmitt of Leo Strauss,” *Etica & Politica / Ethics & Politics*, 21 (2019), pp. 115-142.

41. *Introduction* 1935, p. 27 (38, slightly modified translation).

42. *Ibid.*

join a “purely political Zionism.” On this strictly political exit, Strauss makes a judgement that is itself strictly political: he considers it “an exit that is [...] highly honorable but not, in earnest and in the long run, adequate.”⁴³

Whether or not such a political assessment captures the actual political situation of German Jews in 1935 is certainly debatable. But this is not the crucial point of the passage. Rather, the crucial point here lies in the fact that Strauss distinguishes a *real* aporia from this aporia that is only ‘*apparent*’: “this situation *not only appears to have no way out [ausweglos], but this is actually the case*, as long as one clings to the modern premises.”⁴⁴ Strauss is thus explicitly referring to an aporia that is not practical and political, but theoretical and systematic. In other words, it is an aporia in which he finds himself as a philosopher: i.e. a person whose way of life consists in philosophizing and consequently someone who – despite being “a Jew” – “cannot be Orthodox.” Now, just like the 1962 Preface, the entire 1935 Introduction can be seen as an exposé – or more precisely, as a ‘hermeneutic phenomenology’ – of this theoretical-systematic aporia. I cannot go into the details of the text here. So, I will just limit myself to dealing with what I consider to be its main points. Strauss refers here to his own earlier inquiry into Spinoza, but he does not limit himself to pointing out its meta-critical outcome: namely, the failure of Spinoza’s attempt to demonstrate the impossibility of miracles. With regard to this crucial result of his *Spinoza-Buch*, Strauss takes a step forward – or rather, he takes a step forward by taking a step backward, thus revealing the intellectual background of the meta-critical stance taken in that book. Two prominent philosophical figures emerge here: Hermann Cohen and Franz Rosenzweig. Strauss had already devoted some important studies to Cohen,⁴⁵ and to Rosenzweig he had even dedicated his book on Spinoza. They can certainly be considered as two of Strauss’s *auctores* (in the Latin meaning of the word, from *augere*, ‘to increase’ or ‘to let grow’). However, I will try to show that in referring to his two *auctores*, Strauss makes a critique that is actually a *self*-critique.

In Strauss’s eyes, what most unites Cohen and Rosenzweig is the need, passionately felt by both, to make a ‘return movement’ [*Rückkehrbewegung*]⁴⁶ back to the ‘religion of the prophets’ through a new reading of the Old Testament sources. Let us consider only the figure of Cohen here. The title of his most important Jewish study perfectly describes the ‘backward movement’ indicated by Strauss: *The Religion of Reason Based on the Sources of Judaism* [*Die Religion der Vernunft aus den Quellen des Judentums*] (1919). An essential feature of

43. *Ibid.*

44. *Ibid.* (italics added).

45. Cf. *Cohens Analyse der Bibel-Wissenschaft Spinozas* (1924), in Leo STRAUSS, *Die Religionskritik Spinozas und zugehörige Schriften*, pp. 363-387; *Cohen und Maimuni* (1931), in Leo STRAUSS, *Philosophie und Gesetz - Frühe Schriften*, pp. 393-436.

46. *Introduction* 1935, p. 15 (27).

Cohen's 'backward movement' is his critique of the distortive way in which the Enlightenment critique of religion had treated faith – and especially Jewish faith. This is why Cohen attached great importance to an engagement with Spinoza, to whom he addressed the 1915 study *Spinoza über Staat und Religion, Judentum und Christentum*: indeed, Cohen maintains that it was Spinoza who, in several passages of the *Theological-Political Treatise*, gave a scandalously distorted picture of Old Testament faith. Furthermore – and even more reprehensible to Cohen – it was the Jewish Spinoza who preferred the New Testament as an expression of a rational religion to the Old Testament as an expression of pure superstition. As a neo-Kantian, the Jewish Cohen could not but aim to reverse Spinoza's perspective: i.e. to show the 'religion of reason' moving forward in history from 'the sources,' not of Christianity, but 'of Judaism.'

Cohen's criticism of Spinoza's criticism of the Jewish religion was extremely polemical: he judged that Spinoza's expulsion from the synagogue was fully deserved, for he had committed "a humanly incomprehensible act of treason" against his own people, thus proving himself possessed by "an evil demon."⁴⁷ There is certainly no trace of such a polemical attitude in Strauss's 1930 book. Rather, Strauss discusses the *Theological-Political Treatise* in a detached, strictly 'value-free' way, completely devoid of the polemical bitterness that characterizes Cohen's deeply religious stance. Indeed, according to a private statement of Strauss himself, the *Spinoza-Buch* was a book written by a Jew that "cannot believe in God."⁴⁸ But if we leave aside this profound difference in personal orientation toward the religion for a moment, we find that Strauss's approach to Spinoza is similar to Cohen's in one essential respect: namely, in its *theoretical-systematical* respect: both are actually carrying out a *meta-critique of the Enlightenment critique of religion*. After all, as I showed in the previous section, even Strauss maintains that Spinoza does not understand faith at all. And according to Strauss's 1930 book, it is precisely Spinoza's fundamental inability to understand his opponent that is the source of the failure of his attempt to refute the possibility of miracle. Now, it is precisely this meta-critical approach to the Enlightenment's critique of religion that Strauss calls into question in the 1935 Introduction. Contrary to what he had argued in his 1930 book about Spinoza's inability to understand the 'pre-giveness' of revelation (which he maintains would have been understood instead by Calvin's orthodox theology), he now argues that "the attack of the Enlightenment [...] was not based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the tradition."⁴⁹ Consequently, Strauss's judgement of the 'failure' of what he called

47. Hermann COHEN, *Spinoza über Staat und Religion, Judentum und Christentum*, in *Jüdische Schriften* (hrsg. von Bruno STRAUSS), III, Berlin, C.A. Schweische & Sohn, 1924, p. 361.

48. *Korrespondenz Leo Strauss – Gerhard Krüger*, Brief von Strauss an Krüger vom 7. Januar 1930, in Leo STRAUSS, *Hobbes' politische Wissenschaft und zugehörige Schriften - Briefe*, p. 380.

49. *Introduction* 1935, p. 16 (28, italics added).

‘metaphysical’ (or ‘systematic,’ ‘aggressive,’ ‘immanent’) critique, as opposed to defensive critique, is now very different. This is already implied in a passage from the 1935 Introduction that we quoted in the previous section:

For this is precisely what characterizes the Enlightenment: In the name of supposedly or only ostensibly ‘immanent’ critique and the further development of tradition, it makes extremes within the tradition the basis of a position that is in fact totally incompatible with the tradition.⁵⁰

As we observed above, Strauss here adumbrates *en passant* an interpretative hypothesis in which one can almost detect a foreshadowing of his later ‘exoteric-esoteric writing thesis’: that ‘immanent critique’ should be regarded as ‘only *ostensibly*’ immanent. Thus, far from expressing Spinoza’s deepest intention, it rather belongs to the ‘surface’ of a more complex argumentative strategy, of which it is only the foreground or the most conspicuous aspect. This implies that the failure of what Strauss previously (in 1930) called the “attack on the very core of revealed religion”⁵¹ – namely, the failure of Spinoza’s attempt to refute the possibility of the miraculous – now loses importance for him; more precisely, it no longer constitutes the criterion for discerning the ultimate meaning of Spinoza’s critique of religion. This interpretation – which is only hinted at here – is formulated more clearly in a later passage:

(...) *in spite of its opposite appearance*, the Enlightenment’s critique of orthodoxy is in truth purely defensive: *it rests upon the radical renunciation of a refutation of orthodoxy*. What was proven by the Enlightenment was not the impossibility, but only the unknowability of miracles.⁵²

Even more explicit in this respect is a note on the same page, where Strauss states that

(...) the Enlightenment could not prove and – insofar as it understood itself – *could not even will [wollen] to prove* the impossibility of miracles, but only their unknowability.⁵³

Spinoza’s fundamental intention, then, is not – as Strauss thought in the 1930 book – to refute the possibility of miracles. Such a ‘change of orientation’ in the judgement of what is undoubtedly a crucial point in Strauss’s earlier

50. *Introduction* 1935, p. 13 (25, modified translation).

51. *Religionskritik* 1930, p. 271 (213).

52. *Introduction* 1935, p. 21 (32, italics added).

53. *Ibid.* (italics added, slightly modified translation). In an earlier passage, Strauss argues for this thesis in a more attenuated form, attributing to the radical Enlightenment a kind of emotional awareness of the impossibility of refuting orthodoxy: “Yet in carrying out their critique, precisely the most radical Enlighteners learned – *if not as something clearly known, then at least as something vividly felt* – that as a consequence of the irrefutability of orthodoxy’s ultimate premise, all individual assertions resting on this premise are unshakable (*Introduction* 1935, p. 18 (29, italics added)).

reading of Spinoza proves that the meta-critical approach is abandoned – or, more precisely, it becomes itself an object of criticism in the 1935 Introduction. Now it is not the Enlightenment critique of religion that Strauss critically analyzes, but the meta-criticism which the latter has been constantly subjected to throughout the entire post-Enlightenment understanding of religion – from Schleiermacher's philosophy of religion to the Jewish 'movement backward' (which, as I have just shown, implicitly includes his own book on Spinoza).

Why then does Strauss change his orientation, i.e. why does he abandon the 'critique of critique' meticulously developed in the 1930 book and instead advocate a *Wiederholung* – 'resumption' or 're-understanding'⁵⁴ – of the quarrel between radical Enlightenment and religious orthodoxy? Does he intend to rehabilitate the radical Enlightenment – which is to say, to advocate unqualified atheism? Or, on the contrary, does he intend to argue on behalf of the religious orthodoxy that the Radical Enlightenment opposed?⁵⁵ I admit that certain passages in the Introduction can support either interpretation if they are taken separately. However, I consider both interpretations to be misleading, because both miss the essential point of this difficult text. To grasp this essential point, the text must be read beginning from its end. That is, the entire text must be read as a 'hermeneutic phenomenology' of the aporia in which Strauss openly declares himself to be at the end of the text, as I have shown above. As I said before, the aporia is of a strictly theoretical-systematic nature: more precisely, it *undermines the possibility of philosophy*. It is precisely this danger that Strauss sees in the meta-critical approach that characterizes the post-Enlightenment way of understanding religion. The most telling example of this pitfall is what appears in the 1935 Introduction as the final and extreme outcome of post-Enlightenment philosophy: the '*Atheismus aus Redlichkeit*,' 'atheism stemming from probity'.⁵⁶ This expression was certainly coined with a Nietzschean source in mind, although Strauss illustrates it in a note by quoting texts by Gerhard Krüger and Karl Löwith.⁵⁷ For my part, I would suggest that behind this expression is, more than anyone else, Max Weber – or at least this is what is indicated by some implicit quotes in the 1935 Introduction of his famous 1917 lecture "Science as a Vocation." Nor can it be ruled out that Strauss deliberately sketched out the figure of the 'atheist by probity' by

54. *Introduction* 1935, p. 17 (26).

55. Regarding this *vexata quaestio*, see, for example, the opposed interpretations proposed by two early readers of the Introduction: Scholem, who saw in it a confession of atheism, and Löwith, who instead saw in it a confession of orthodoxy. Jacob Klein proved to be much more attentive to the complexity of the theoretical texture of the Introduction, as he instead saw that in it "everything remains open" (cf. Heinrich MEIER, *How Strauss became Strauss*, pp. 20-21).

56. Cf. *Introduction* 1935, pp. 24-26 (35-38).

57. *Introduction* 1935, p. 25 (37-38). As Laurence LAMPERT, *The Enduring Importance of Leo Strauss*, Chicago MI - London: The University of Chicago Press, 2013, pp. 220-222, aptly observes, the Nietzschean source is the chapter "Our Virtues" in *Beyond Good and Evil*.

creating a kind of collage of different profiles (and not excluding his own). But let us refrain from discussing this point and instead try to understand the meaning he attaches to this strange expression.

The first essential feature of Strauss's concept of 'atheism stemming from probity' lies in the peculiar reason why it rejects 'religious representations': these are "rejected not because they are frightening, but because they are desirable, because they are comforting."⁵⁸ This is a real reversal: not only of the Epicurean critique of religion, but also of the Enlightenment critique of religion – which, as Strauss argued in his 1930 book, is still indebted to Epicureanism in this respect. From the Epicurean perspective, and again from the Enlightenment perspective, religion appeared as "a tool which man has forged for dark reasons in order to torment himself, to make life unnecessarily difficult."⁵⁹ This is why the philosophical criticism of religion has the therapeutic function of being "a means of alleviating the fear of divinity [*numen*] and of death by showing that both have no object."⁶⁰ In the perspective that emerges at the end of the post-Enlightenment philosophical tradition, religion appears instead as "an escape from the terror and hopelessness of life (chosen for very obvious reasons) which cannot be eradicated by any progress of civilization to make one's life easier."⁶¹ Criticizing religion now becomes proudly 'moral' or 'virtuous': the atheist attitude understands itself as "new kind of fortitude, which forbids itself every flight from the horror of life into a comforting delusion and which accepts the eloquent descriptions of the misery of man without God as a proof of the goodness of its cause."⁶²

According to Strauss, the 'probity' that lies at the origin of the new atheism is thus intellectual probity or 'intellectual moral conscience' [*intellektuelles Gewissen*], which – according to an unmistakably Weberian-sounding statement by Gerhardt Krüger that Strauss quotes in a note – "means the 'inner' sovereignty that science has over man – and this refers not just to any science, but to modern science."⁶³ Having sketched out such a Weberian atheist figure who, "for reasons of moral conscience [*aus Gewissen*], refuses to believe in God," Strauss proceeds with this crucial and startling remark:

Thus, it becomes clear that this atheism – in comparison not only to the original Epicureanism but also to the most 'radical' atheism of the age of Enlightenment – is a descendant of the tradition grounded in the Bible: [the way that] it receives

58. *Introduction* 1935, p. 25 (36).

59. *Ibid.*

60. *Introduction* 1935, p. 24 (35, trans. slightly modified).

61. *Introduction* 1935, p. 25 (36-37).

62. *Introduction* 1935, p. 25 (37).

63. Gerhard KRÜGER, *Philosophie und Moral in der Kantischen Kritik*, Tübingen, Mohr, 1931, p. 9, footnote 2 (quoted in *Introduction* 1935, p. 25 (137, trans. slightly modified)).

the thesis – that is, the negation made by the Enlightenment – is based on an ethos [*Gesinnung*] which became possible only through the Bible.⁶⁴

As I just said, it is a crucial remark, but it should also be added that it is a somewhat misleading remark. *Prima facie*, it sounds like a kind of ‘dialectical’ argument. That is, one may presume that Strauss means to say that *Gesinnung* – i.e. the biblical ethos or morality underlying ‘atheism by probity’ – actually neutralizes its own anti-religious ‘thesis’: namely, “the negation [of revelation] made by the Enlightenment.” On this view, the anti-religious thesis of the Enlightenment taken up by the new atheism would be seen by Strauss as an only apparent or false negation, because the ‘negated’ religion or belief is actually presupposed and thus affirmed by the negation itself. To put it in another, somewhat simpler way: on this view, Strauss intends in this passage to expose the new atheism as a form of religiosity that is unaware of being such. Accordingly, he would denounce it as a kind of ‘false consciousness.’ The passage itself could certainly allow for such a ‘dialectical’ interpretation, but only if it is taken out of the context of the main argument that Strauss develops in the 1935 Introduction. Indeed, it should be noted that interpreting the passage in this way implicitly assumes that Strauss here claims to understand the ‘atheist by probity’ better than the atheist understands him or herself. In other words: on this view, Strauss would once again be proposing a meta-critique of the critique of religion, showing that the atheist by probity is under the spell of an illusion. Accordingly, Strauss would here be repeating the same argument he made in 1930 about the “Illusion of Critique” to which Spinoza is said to have fallen victim (see above, pp. 371-372).

But it is precisely this meta-critical mode of interpretation – which he himself put forward in the 1930 *Spinoza-Buch* – that is called into question in the entire 1935 Introduction. Consequently, the line of argument to which this passage belongs forces us to interpret it in a different way. Here Strauss is not extending his earlier metacritique to the new form that the modern critique of religion has taken in recent times. Rather, he takes a step backwards from his own, previous meta-critical stance by modestly indicating the aporetic situation of the new atheism as his own situation. In other words, he limits himself to demonstrating the fact that the philosopher cannot avoid presenting himself or herself as a believer, thereby endangering his or her own way of life – which is to say, making it impossible. To cite some words Strauss added to a page of the 1962 Preface (which reproduces almost verbatim the pages of the 1935 Introduction that we have been considering): the ‘claim’ that drives

64. *Introduction* 1935, p. 26 (37, transl. slightly modified): “Eben damit wird klar, daß dieser Atheismus, verglichen nicht bloß mit dem ursprünglichen Epikureismus, sondern auch mit dem am meisten ‘radikalen’ Atheismus des Aufklärungszeitalters, ein Abkömmling der in der Bibel begründeten Tradition ist: er rezipiert die These, die Negation der Aufklärung auf Grund einer *Gesinnung*, die allein durch die Bibel möglich geworden ist.”

atheism by probity to ‘understand’ religion ‘radically’ – i.e., the very claim of modern philosophy to grasp the root out of which religion arises – “cannot deceive one about the fact that its basis is an act of will, of belief, and, being based on belief, is fatal to *any* philosophy.”⁶⁵ In other words, the problem that is left unsolved by the atheism by probity is the *problem of the possibility of philosophy* that inevitably arises in the very act of its becoming public or ‘political.’ This explains why philosophical exotericism is needed.

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SUMMARY

In this paper I first (§2) examine the metacriticism of modern critique of religion that Strauss formulates in his first book on Spinoza (1930). According to this early interpretation by Strauss, Spinoza undertakes a metaphysical critique of religion in order to confute the ontological possibility of divine revelation (or ‘miracle thesis’). Spinoza’s attempt, however, ends in an aporia: the ultimate presupposition underlying belief in revelation remains irrefutable. In the §3 I examine a text published by Strauss shortly afterwards (1935), in which I detect a self-critique of his earlier meta-criticism of modern critique of religion. Strauss become aware here that his own understanding of Spinoza’s aporia is itself aporetic. It is in this aporia, in my view, that we must look for the key to understanding what Strauss would call retrospectively (1962) his own ‘change of orientation’ and, consequently, his discovery of ‘philosophical exotericism.’

SOMMAIRE

Dans cet article, je commence (§2) par examiner la métacritique de la critique moderne de la religion que Strauss formule dans son premier livre sur Spinoza (1930). Selon cette première interprétation de Strauss, Spinoza entreprend une critique métaphysique de la religion afin de réfuter la possibilité ontologique de la révélation divine (ou “thèse du miracle”). La tentative de Spinoza aboutit cependant à une aporie: le présupposé ultime qui sous-tend la croyance en la révélation reste irréfutable. Dans le §3, j’examine un texte publié par Strauss peu après (1935), dans lequel je décèle une autocritique de la méta-critique précédente de la critique de la religion moderne. Strauss se rend compte ici que sa propre compréhension de l’aporie de Spinoza est elle-même aporétique. C’est dans cette aporie, à mon avis, qu’il faut chercher la clé pour comprendre ce que Strauss appellera rétrospectivement (1962) son propre “changement d’orientation” et, par conséquent, sa découverte de “l’exotérisme philosophique”.

65. *Religionskritik* 1930, p. 53 (30, italics added).