

MICHAEL OAKESHOTT

Religion, Politics
and the Moral Life

Editor
Timothy Fuller

RELIGION, POLITICS AND THE MORAL LIFE

Michael Oakeshott

Edited by Timothy Fuller

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RELIGION, POLITICS AND
THE MORAL LIFE

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PREFACE

Timothy Fuller

Michael Oakeshott, we can now say, wrote a great deal of much interest that he never published.¹ In the 1920s and 1930s he wrote and did not publish as much as he wrote and did publish. This large unpublished cache comprises mostly fully elaborated, completed manuscripts, some handwritten, some typed. Most but not all of these Oakeshott dated. In the present volume, four of the essays have never before been published. Two of these four are typed and dated in his hand (1925 and 1929), and two are undated handwritten originals. Of the latter two, I judge that 'The Concept of a Philosophy of Politics' was written in the mid-1940s, around the time Oakeshott was producing his edition of Hobbes's *Leviathan*, and that 'Political Philosophy' was probably written a bit later, near the time he was composing 'Political Education'.

There are other essays and several book-length manuscripts.² These manuscripts reveal Oakeshott's early style and intellectual preoccupations, for at that time Oakeshott often spelt

¹ The most complete bibliography of Oakeshott's published works, taking account of all previous bibliographical work by W. H. Greenleaf, J. L. Auspitz, Oliver Starp and Paul Franco, has been published by John H. Liddington in *The Achievement of Michael Oakeshott*, edited by Jesse Norman (London: Gerald Duckworth and Co. Ltd, 1993).

² There is a typescript from the mid-1920s, about 190 pages in length, titled *A Discussion of Some Matters Preliminary to the Study of Political Philosophy*. A work of nearly the same length from the 1930s, without a general title, could, on the basis of its chapters, be called *The Politics of Faith and the Politics of Scepticism*, 'politics of faith' referring to what later Oakeshott called 'rationalism in politics', 'politics of scepticism' referring to Oakeshott's own idea of politics as the 'pursuit of intimations' that he developed in *Rationalism in Politics*. There are eight lectures, presented at Harvard in the late 1950s, called *Morality and Politics in Modern Europe*, in part a prototype for *On Human Conduct* (1975). Numerous notebooks from the 1920s of his own extensive commentaries on Plato's dialogues, Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics*, Spinoza's writings and those of others, include parallel quotations from commentators Oakeshott was reading at the time. There are occasional essays on the philosophy of history, on education and on law.

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out in detail the authors and books he was reading, occasionally compiling lists of works consulted. The footnoted references in these cases are extensive by contrast to the published essays, and much more revealing of what interested him at that time. Oakeshott's reticence about discussing sources and influences is legendary among students of his work. Comparing the published and unpublished works, one finds that the published works achieve an idiomatic independence expressing his oft celebrated style and showing how deeply Oakeshott ingested and transformed the sources, making them his own. Yet the unpublished works are not drafts of the published works; they are different expressions of his ideas, often illuminating and accessible in a way that the more brilliant published works tend not to be for some readers.

The notebooks of the 1920s make it clear that he studied the works of Plato and Aristotle in considerable detail, often writing out line-by-line analyses of their major works. His comments on Plato's *Republic* could have been the basis for a substantial commentary. Nonetheless, he apparently did this solely for his own edification; there are no manuscripts on either Plato or Aristotle. He took a strong interest in Spinoza's writings, devoting almost as much space to him in his notebooks as to Plato and Aristotle, while Hobbes makes little explicit appearance at this stage.

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INTRODUCTION

Timothy Fuller

Oakeshott's interest in religion and theology in the 1920s is pronounced. This is true of all of his essays of the period, published and unpublished. They both show the idiosyncratic nature of his religious outlook and express convictions about the living of one's life that describe the self-understanding he exhibited in the life he actually lived.

The previously unpublished essay 'Religion and the World' (1929) especially works out the point of view Oakeshott adopted for the conduct of his own life. It is his philosophical reflection on what it means to live 'religiously' in the 'world'. Philosophically, the essay, in common with many of the essays of the period, prefigures his argument that the human world is constituted as a world of thought, which he later elaborated in *Experience and its Modes* (Cambridge U.P., 1933).

Oakeshott remarks the tendency in Christianity from the beginning to dichotomize the world. In the primitive Church the dichotomy was understood to be between the present age and the redeemed age of the heavenly kingdom to come, which would supersede the present age. In medieval times, in the wake of the 'delay' of the eschaton, it was the dichotomy between the fleshly and the spiritual worlds. In post-medieval times the language of dichotomy between flesh and spirit was gradually transformed into a dichotomy between two scales of values within the world – one materialistic and vulgar, the other intellectual/spiritual and, one might say, 'noble', although Oakeshott shies away from high language. There is in this something, purged of grandeur and pretension, echoing Matthew Arnold, but filtered through Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Pater, all of whom he read at that time.

The modern development of Christian thinking is what Oakeshott found both congenial as a catalyst for his thought, and, though in no sense a mere return, closer to the original

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experience of Christianity than the medieval alternative; it dramatizes the sense that human beings must choose how to live here and now, and what we choose will constitute our fundamental religious task.

In order to reach the modern idea emphasizing choice between two alternative modes of conducting a life on earth – wherein speculation on relating that choice to an afterlife recedes – it was necessary to overcome the medieval distinction between the ‘natural’ and the ‘supernatural’. But all of these Christian ways of thinking Oakeshott treats as the historical unfolding of alternative interpretative responses to a divide understood as central in human experience. The vividness of the Christian experience resides in the constant effort of human beings to make sense of the world in terms of their belief that there are dichotomous alternatives and that a choice must be made. Unity of one’s life, satisfaction within life, is a matter of gaining a self-understanding which is coherent for us, which promises to unify what is divided. The way, however, in which we characterize the fundamental choices, and conceive coherency, changes over time.

Oakeshott finds ‘world’ a term invested with many different meanings and no immutable meaning, although it has a number of historically identifiable focal meanings that can be recovered. Oakeshott distinguishes ‘worldly’ from ‘religious’ for the present age: the worldly man’s world has a material character, a process with a past and future which, he believes, defines him and sets for him his task in life; it provides an external measure of success and bids him to measure himself by his achievement on its scale. Success as an external standard dominates. Career is central; safety, prudence, regularity and possession the desiderata.

By contrast, the ‘religious man’ seeks insight, sensibility, self-understanding; he bears concern for the features of the worldly life lightly and with a certain disdain. The issue for the religious man is to live according to what he understands and concludes to be of value, not taking what is offered from elsewhere as a true measure without critically judging it. The religious man is self-contained without demanding isolation or rejecting others. He aspires to be something for himself in the midst of a world which invites the abandonment of such effort: ‘Ambition and the world’s greed for visible results, in which each stage is a mere approach to the goal, would be superseded by a life which carried in each of its moments its whole mean-

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ing and value.' The religious man lives in the present moment and for the possibility of realizing himself then and there. He seeks to achieve a consistent character in the midst of the contingencies of life through the clarity of his vision of what he supposes he is and is trying to become. This means that to live religiously is not to live for the prevailing standards, nor for some career goal, but for gaining insight and sensibility, and with a commitment to enjoy 'candid detachment in the face of the very highest actual achievement'. In short, 'achievements' do not count much; what counts most is to conduct one's life in accordance with one's self-chosen understanding of the possibilities of life in the time and place one has. Achievements are but secondary manifestations of the lived life.

Religion is 'simply life itself, life dominated by the belief that its value is in the present'. To be always preparing for life as if it were yet to come, to be always acting now for the sake of some putative later repose, result or salvation is to lead an irreligious or worldly life. The religious individual lives between the extremes of moral prejudice and moral experiment: the former ties one to a hypothetical past perfection, the latter to a hypothetical perfection to come. Each conspires against the animating spirit of one's own self-understanding to be realized here and now. To live religiously is to live with freedom from regret for the past and from calculation for the future; both regret and calculation and invitations to a tedious round of imitation or loss of *self*-understanding. Oakeshott will take nothing in exchange for the self. He is content to be something for himself and cares not whether he is known to be something. This is his attitude and intention.

This is exactly the outlook Oakeshott carried with him throughout his life. It permeates all of his writing, even though often elusively or in a concealed way. I am not suggesting that he had anything like a secret or esoteric doctrine. It is true that after the early 1930s he wrote virtually nothing that overtly discussed these topics. Discerning readers note his references in later writings to biblical images, such as the Tower of Babel, and his meditation on religious experience in *On Human Conduct* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975); but these are so brief as to be confusing to those who have concluded that Oakeshott was an irreligious thinker or an 'atheist'. It is true that he was disdainful of most religious declarations, as he was of much intellectual fashion generally. He was able to be quietly severe in his judgements but he was, on the other hand, tolerant and

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little inclined to be overtly judgemental. He knew well the difficulties of saying anything of value on the most important questions. For the same reason he was hard to please and quietly severe in his judgements. Oakeshott was severe on himself as well, and thus reticent when speaking on religious questions. I believe this is why many things he wrote he did not publish even though he clearly made them publishable. His reticence was his acknowledgement of the difficulties the human imagination must face in seeking to express itself religiously. He thought only a few had ever succeeded brilliantly in the undertaking, most notably St Augustine. For him, theologizing succeeded only if it could present an arresting construction of human experience as the encounter with the eternal in the midst of the irreparable temporality of our lives.

In the last few years of his life, we conversed often on these topics. His exegeses of classic theological writings were remarkable. It is our loss that he did not write them out. We can, however, construct a picture of his religious outlook on the basis of what he did write on these matters, episodic though it is.

In 'Religion and the Moral Life', presented first to his Cambridge colleagues at a meeting of the D Society,¹ Oakeshott rejects the idea that religion and morality are identical, pro-

¹ Published as a 'D Society Pamphlet' by Bowes & Bowes in 1927. The D Society was a group of around six Cambridge dons who met weekly in term-time to present theological papers to each other. Oakeshott wrote me a letter in 1988 describing the D Society as he knew it in the 1920s. John Liddington has kindly shown me a copy of a letter he obtained through Bikhū Parekh, written by Boys-Smith in 1939. Boys-Smith, a Cambridge theologian and one of Oakeshott's close friends, described the D Society. According to him, the 'D' had no significance. I remember asking Oakeshott what it meant: he never answered clearly. Oakeshott describes the participants as theological 'modernists'; Boys-Smith says their purpose was to study the 'Doctrine of the Church of England in the light of knowledge acquired since its formularies were compiled'. Dr John Sandwith Boys-Smith, former Vice-Chancellor of Cambridge University (1963-65) and Master of St John's College, Cambridge (1959-69), died in 1991. He was born on 8 January 1901 at Hordle, Hampshire where his father was the vicar. He was educated at Sherborne and St John's College, Cambridge. Initially he read economics but switched to theology. He was influenced by Rudolf Bultmann and the concept of 'demythologization' after studying in Marburg. Subsequently, he identified himself with the liberal modern churchmen of England. Ordained in 1926, Boys-Smith returned to Cambridge as Fellow and Chaplain of St John's, and served also as Director of Theological Studies. From 1931 to 1940 he was a university lecturer in theology. He was then elected to the Ely professorship which included becoming a canon of Ely Cathedral. He later went through a period of considerable doubt followed by a reaffirmation of personal faith. His writings include *Religious Thought in the 18th Century* (1934), and *Memories of St John's College* (1983).

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posing instead that 'morality is a condition of religious belief', having to do with 'honesty with oneself'. 'Religion', he argued,

if it is an activity of human beings must be the activity of moral personalities; and no religious doctrine or notion can properly be called 'religious' if it does not accord with the requirements of moral personality. . . . Since religion is a relation between God and moral persons, all notions of irresistible grace operating mechanically are impossible, for the characteristic of moral personality is its autonomy.

The moral and the religious, in short, are intertwined, and it is in our self-enactment that we succeed or fail in making them go together for us in our particular circumstances. It follows both that a religious community can never be fully articulated in abstract rules or catechetical exercises, and also that the boundaries between the 'Church' and the 'world' will always be uncertain and necessarily matters of interpretation; how we draw the boundaries will vary and depend a good deal on the moral imagination.

In the moral dimension as such, we will always face the ordeal of living up to one 'ought' after another; no success in one case guarantees success in the next; no success in one case precludes another case for which we may or may not find adequate responses. Moral life is an endless series.

'In religion,' Oakeshott says,

we achieve goodness, not by becoming better, but by losing ourselves in God. For goodness is never achieved by becoming better: that is the self-contradiction of morality that always runs the risk of being self-defeating. Religion, then, is the completion of morality, not in the sense of a final end to an historical series, but as the concrete whole is the completion of all the abstractions analysis may discover in it. Religion is not the sanction of morality, but the whole of which morality is an aspect, and in which mere morality perishes, that is, is discovered as an abstraction.²

The connection to 'Religion and the World' will also be clear. Moral conduct is inherent to social life, but it is animated

²Compare Bernard Bosanquet, whose work Oakeshott was reading at the time: 'We construct our world as an interpretation which attempts to restore the unity which the real has lost by our making its diversity explicit.' *Logic*, II. ix. 1.

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in the self-understandings of individuals who enact their lives within what they find to be the moral structure of social life. The reality of the religious experience emerges in the intersection of moral conduct with the desire for goodness, but that complex experience cannot be reduced to morality alone.

Oakeshott thus concluded that independence of the moral personality is the condition of knowing dependence on God, where such dependence does not and cannot mean blindly obeying God's will. Dependence on God here means imaginative awareness of that which is not satisfied in moral conduct, but which cannot be ignored as a feature of our aspiration to understand ourselves fully. In blind obedience the moral vanishes, excluding a defining characteristic of being human. Religious experience is thus a profound occasion of self-awareness.

But, Oakeshott goes on, the formal autonomy of the moral personality has to be connected to a moral content: 'Free action is not moral action unless it is also wise. . . . A concrete moral action is the autonomous, free *and adequate* reaction of a personality to a situation.' The practical wisdom of our actions is not the achieving of goodness; the good is not an achievement but a kind of transcending of the self that the self can imagine and experience as the losing of oneself in God, but which the self cannot simply bring about by wishing to do so. It is true that in this experience we are actively doing something, but there is no policy that can be designed to bring about the desired fulfilment, if we can even state what that is supposed to be. From this perspective, religion cannot be the sanction of morality because religious experience is not a reward for moral conduct. To think that it is such a reward vulgarizes the religious experience. Here Oakeshott's view reminds one of the examination of piety in Plato's *Euthyphro*.

The experience of transcendence is an encounter through sensibility and insight that occurs in the midst of the ordinariness of our diurnal context. Oakeshott treats the transcending experience neither as an excuse for immoderation nor as negating the necessity of moral deliberation and choice. Nor is Oakeshott prone to speak of transcendence as such. When speaking of what corresponds to it in his outlook, he never describes it as the intervention of the 'wholly other' into our realm of experience. We can only speak of such encounters in ways that situate them in our all too human experience. As we do not induce this encounter, Oakeshott also always speaks of it as the unanticipated, even if hoped-for, discovery of some-

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thing intimated in what we are already doing.³ There is little expression in his writings of struggle or anxious quest, and only infrequently does he dwell on mortality. When he does, he does so in a poetic mood. There is the sense of waiting for or letting the encounter happen. Bringing it about is not the object of moral conduct. Moral conduct, one could say, merely maintains relationships of human beings with each other as they continually shape and adjust their lives together. On the other hand, this maintenance and adjustment are marks of human accomplishment, sometimes of an extraordinary sort.

Morality cannot help but manifest itself in a history of the actual conduct of individuals even as it reveals the universal character of the human as the capacity to enter into moral relationships. Human beings must conduct themselves in specific actions, and, in conducting themselves, the religious element can shine through. We cannot be religious without enacting a pattern of moral practices; we cannot enact a pattern of moral practices without being moved, implicitly or explicitly, by a desire for that completion in goodness which can never be captured fully in the particular decisions we take as we try to do what we think we ought to do. It should be noted, then, that Oakeshott's reference to completion or fulfilment in God is resolutely non-teleological. The religious experience for him separates us from nature – without becoming the 'supernatural' – in that it is entirely an implication of reflective consciousness; religious experience belongs entirely to being human.

Fulfilment is intimated in moral conduct but it is not to be attained by moral conduct. Yet we cannot speak of fulfilment without falling back on what we actually do as the imagining of what we think fulfilment might be. Thus, although at first it may seem Oakeshott is defining two separate dimensions of reality – that of transcending fulfilment and that of day-to-day response to contingent circumstances – he is actually describing different aspects of a single comprehensive range of imaginative human responses, which earlier he had called 'religious' and 'irreligious' or 'worldly'. We cannot speak about fulfilment or completion without expressing ourselves through accumulating historical experiences which cannot themselves

³ Like Montaigne, Oakeshott thought that satisfaction comes by the way, incidentally, in the course of tending to our appointed business. The best results of one's engagements are discoveries, not constructions; they are concrete, specific, and only rarely achieved by calculation.

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simply turn into the hoped-for fulfilment or completion. We make a duality out of a unity in the effort to make a unity we can never quite think we have finally come to possess. Oakeshott later reformulated Hobbes's ceaseless quest for power after power by transposing that insight into the language of the endless effort at self-understanding. By such transposition, Oakeshott sought to rescue the Hobbesian insight from the vulgar interpretations to which it is usually subjected.

There is an obvious connection between Oakeshott's religious view and his analysis of politics: in politics we construct visions of an order that are all too easily construed as the undistorted or true forms of 'defective' actually existing arrangements. In politics we understand ourselves to be situated between the way we think things are and the way we think they ought to be. We continually break the unity of our world of experience into the 'is' and the 'ought to be' in search of a unity that eludes us. The single realm of human experience continually tries to duplicate itself in a putatively better alternative. Politics is an undertaking that is vulnerable to the desire for perfection but incapable of achieving it. The Tower of Babel is the true story of the human condition at every moment.

For Oakeshott, then, a satisfactory understanding of religious experience would help us come to a clearer idea of political experience, assisting us to acknowledge that politics is, as he later argued in 'Political Education' (1951), a 'necessary evil'.⁴ Political engagements are 'necessary' because they are both unavoidable and unsought (but Oakeshott does not call them 'natural' because their necessity does not determine their character); they are 'evil' because they too easily obscure our awareness that political aspirations cannot replace the fulfilment that comes in religious insight and individually cultivated sensibility, and thus detract from our capacity to live in the present. The 'worldly man' repeatedly politicizes this fulfilment and thus, intentionally or not, depreciates the present for the sake of a future present that we will not possess.

This temptation is summarized and rejected succinctly in Oakeshott's brief essay on 'The Claims of Politics' (*Scrutiny*, 8, 1939, pp. 146–51).⁵ This essay also marks a move toward

⁴ Published originally by Bowes & Bowes in 1951, reprinted in *Rationalism in Politics* (Methuen, 1962).

⁵ 'The Claims of Politics' should be seen as accompaniment to Oakeshott's sceptical examination of the *Social and Political Doctrines of Contemporary Europe*, also published in 1939.

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the increasing concern with politics that was to characterize Oakeshott's post-World War II writings. Oakeshott reminds us that to maintain and to rejuvenate a culture is not the task solely or principally of those who engage in public life:

Just as the similar belief that the true, unhindered service of God was possible only to members of a religious order or officials of the Church (that is, to those who made a profession of it) promoted a false and irreligious division between those who were called to serve God and those who were not, and gave a false importance to the former, so this belief about social service promotes the erroneous view that some activity is disconnected from the communal life of a society and gives a false importance to the activity of those who engage in public life.

Oakeshott's post-Hobbesian/Lockean reformation theology informs his understanding of politics as well. Just as he rejects the distinction between the priest and the layman, so he rejects pejorative distinctions between public service and private selfishness. Social life is a whole composed of distinct and real individual members. The character of the social whole is in the care of, and dependent upon, the imagination of all its participants. Political responsibility is but one aspect of a larger whole which can never be understood adequately from the political viewpoint alone – perhaps not even primarily:

A political system is primarily for the protection and occasional modification of a recognized legal and social order. It is not self-explanatory; its end and meaning lie beyond itself in the social whole to which it belongs, a social whole already determined by law and custom and tradition, none of which is the creation of political activity.

Political engagements presuppose a civilization and are reactive to it. Those drawn to political involvement have their own, for Oakeshott often vulgar, motives. These are not generalizable as universal motives of human beings. Politics is necessary but to be kept in perspective and in its place. Politics maintains and defends social life (later, in 'Political Education', Oakeshott will say politics is the activity of 'attending' to society's arrangements), but seldom rejuvenates or recreates it. The latter task falls to poets, artists, philosophers and to the imaginative use of their resources by countless individuals.

The refreshment emanating from the poets, artists and phil-