

10-2013

Michael Oakeshott: Religion, Politics and the Moral Life

Noël K. O'Sullivan

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/id-journal>



Part of the [Ethics and Political Philosophy Commons](#), [International and Area Studies Commons](#), [International and Intercultural Communication Commons](#), [International Relations Commons](#), and the [Political Theory Commons](#)

Please take our feedback survey at: https://unomaha.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_8cchtFmpDyGfBLE

Recommended Citation

O'Sullivan, Noël K. (2013) "Michael Oakeshott: Religion, Politics and the Moral Life," *International Dialogue*: Vol. 3, Article 18.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32873/uno.dc.ID.3.1.1067>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/id-journal/vol3/iss1/18>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the The Goldstein Center for Human Rights at DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in International Dialogue by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu.

Review

Michael Oakeshott: Religion, Politics and the Moral Life

Timothy Fuller (ed). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011. 160pp.

Noël K. O'Sullivan^{*}

Although students of Michael Oakeshott have special reason to be grateful to Timothy Fuller for this carefully selected volume of ten of Oakeshott's early and mid-career essays, as well as for the scholarly introduction Fuller has provided, his book will also appeal to general readers concerned to grapple with the central issues of modern life and thought with which Oakeshott constantly wrestled. Four of the essays have never been previously published and six are now made available in a more accessible form.

In the years after Oakeshott succeeded to Harold Laski's chair at the London School of Economics (LSE) he gave an annual talk to new undergraduates about the purpose of a liberal education. This, he told them, is not merely to acquire facts, or skills, or training for a career but is, rather, to acquire "what in the end, on [your] far distant death beds, [you] will recognize as one of the things most worth having," which is "a mind and some thoughts of your own" (Oakeshott 2004: 334). The aim, in other words, is to transform the ready made, off-the-peg self with which life begins into a self uniquely

^{*} **Noël K. O'Sullivan** is research professor of political philosophy at the University of Hull. His research interests focus on the history of political thought; theory of the modern state; British and European political philosophy, especially in the twentieth century; and political extremism in modern European politics. He is the author of *The Concept of the Public Realm* (Routledge, 2010), *European Political Thought since 1945* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), and *Political Theory in Transition* (Routledge, 2000).

one's own. Oakeshott did not elaborate in his talk, however, on what this self looks like. Fuller's anthology sheds valuable light on the principal sources on which Oakeshott drew in the course of formulating the mature view of the self and its relation to the world found in his magnum opus, *On Human Conduct* (1975).

In this respect the first two essays in the book, "Religion and the World" (1929) and "Religion and the Moral Life" (1927), are especially instructive, pointing as they do to three sources in particular. The first is religion, the self-avowed influence of which on Oakeshott's early thought contrasts markedly with his relatively rare references to it in his late writings. Although Oakeshott's sympathy lay in particular with the protestant version of Christianity, with its emphasis on the inward nature of the spiritual life, perhaps the most notable feature is his rejection of any kind of asceticism. The Christian ideal of spirituality, he wrote, does not involve turning away from the world but means, on the contrary, the ability to value the world properly by appreciating things as they are in themselves, instead of treating them solely as contributions to outward success (30).

When success is the goal, the ability to enjoy the present which is the essence of the spiritual life is lost since only future accomplishments, such as creating a reputation or contributing to some art or science, are valued. Belief in success, Oakeshott adds, carries with it the unfortunate notion that "a career is the main aim of life; for a career is the only evidence a man has of external accomplishment, if he makes no contribution to art, science or literature." In that case, the melancholy result is that "for the sake of an hypothetical old man who bear his name thirty years hence, the young man hoards his energies and restrains his activities" (31). When spirituality is properly understood, Oakeshott writes, religion is no longer "a power which governs life from the outside," with concomitant sanctions or rewards; it becomes "simply life itself, life dominated by the belief that its value is in the present" (34). The reader is bound to pause here and wonder quite what Oakeshott considered distinctively Christian about his concept of "life" after he had stripped away from Christianity its traditional emphasis on doctrine, eliminated the concepts of a priesthood and church, and rejected the Christian claim to be the bearer of a privileged revelation. What is clear, at least, is that Oakeshott would not permit any of the constraints usually associated with Christianity to stand in his way.

The second source of Oakeshott's ethical inspiration is the ideal of self-realization central to the ethics of his predecessors in the British Idealist tradition. Like T. H. Green and Bernard Bosanquet, the early Oakeshott emphasizes the moral, non-

egotistical, anti-utilitarian and social nature of this ideal, according to which the ultimate goal of the self is only achieved within a whole (i.e., the Absolute, or God) that transcends the mind/body and spirit/matter dualisms of classical Western metaphysics and theology whilst simultaneously enhancing the integrity of particular selves in all their diversity. In line with the British Idealist tradition, Oakeshott describes his own ideal of spirituality as the realization of a self which is “its own achievement,” in the sense that it carries “within each of its moments its whole meaning and value” (31–32).

In a third early essay, “Some Remarks on the Nature and Meaning of Sociality” (1925), Oakeshott repeated his view that “God is the only principle of sociability that will explain the facts of life,” but fleshed out the meaning of self-realization more fully by emphasizing the virtue of patriotism in a way absent from the mature model of civil association developed in *On Human Conduct*. “Patriotism,” he maintained, “is the basis of all morality, in short, is the greatest emotion and intellectual effort of which we are capable” (60–61).

The third source of Oakeshott’s ethical inspiration is the romantic tradition, the influence of which is evident in, for example, his rejection of abstract universal ideals in favour of a commitment to the emotional experience of love and friendship as “the real life of a society” and “the principle of good” (59). It is also evident in his contempt for the mediocrity of modern mass civilization—a contempt he shares with, amongst others, Nietzsche. In a subsequent essay, Oakeshott’s Nietzschean sympathies were evident in a simple distinction he drew between “individuals,” defined as “persons accustomed to making choices for themselves,” and “anti-individuals” who have “feelings rather than thoughts, impulses rather than options, inabilities rather than passions” (Oakeshott 1991: 73, 364). In the present collection, however, those sympathies are qualified by Oakeshott’s commitment to the Idealist concept of the sociality of the self and surface mainly in the contempt already noted which he expresses for the modern concern with worldly success and material gain.

It is not only the sources of Oakeshott’s early concept of the self in religion, Idealist philosophy and romanticism which are illuminated by Fuller’s anthology, however. The essays also shed light on the development of several other vital aspects of Oakeshott’s view of the self and its relation to the world, one of which is his sense of the historicity of human experience. Although this theme is once again explored mainly in its religious bearing in the essay “The Importance of the Historical Element in Christianity”

(1928), a more general problem emerges about the relation between identity and time when Oakeshott observes that concern with history has now become “part of our normal *Weltanschauung*” (69). This problem, to be precise, is that:

Identity, so far from excluding differences, is meaningless in their absence, just as difference or change depend upon something whose identity is not destroyed by that change. It is not a matter of size or shape, or of anything so abstract as spirit or purpose; on the contrary, it seems to lie, first, in the avoidance of any absolute break in a thing's existence, and, beyond that and governing that, in some qualitative element to be discovered only by reference to the general character of the thing concerned. (67)

At this intellectual stage, Oakeshott's exploration of identity in difference did not go beyond this formulation, which he described as a “by no means original suggestion.” Five years later, however, a very original refinement of his early analysis emerged in *Experience and Its Modes*, where he distinguished between an autonomous form of historical identity, on the one hand, and the “practical” historical identity sought for example in religion and politics, on the other. Later still, in perhaps his most impressive philosophical achievement, Oakeshott characterized historical identity in *On History and Other Essays* as a purely contingent form of identity which historical understanding seeks to make intelligible without invoking generalization or teleology, either of which would compromise contingency.

The five remaining essays selected by Fuller deal with the authority of the state, the nature of politics and the definition of political philosophy. So far as the authority of the state is concerned, although the essay is written in the shadow of Bosanquet, and hence in terms far removed from those found in *On Human Conduct*, the early essay nevertheless has two important continuities with Oakeshott's mature theory of civil association. One is Oakeshott's insistence that political authority is moral, and therefore distinct from mere power or domination. Only when the moral status of authority is acknowledged is it possible to speak of obligation to a non-voluntary association (viz., the state) and to maintain, as Oakeshott does both in his early work and in his fully developed theory of civil association, that the authority of the state is perfectly compatible with the autonomy of the individual.

The other continuity is Oakeshott's claim that "a real authority is something which we cannot go behind, something from which there is no possibility of appeal . . ." (85). Oakeshott subsequently qualified this claim by allowing that there can in fact be an appeal against authority, provided that the appeal is made to a higher authority within an overarching constitutional framework and not to a supposedly higher principle of rationality, or independent concept of natural law. In this respect his concept of authority always remained close to that of Hobbes, despite the fact that in the early essay included by Fuller his analysis of authority entails a description of the state (after the fashion of Bosanquet) as "the totality in an actual community which satisfies the whole mind of the individuals who comprise it" (83). Although Oakeshott's early Idealist language differs greatly from the more narrowly juridical vision of civil association found in his mature thought, then, his search for an ethical conception of the state remained a constant theme of his political philosophy, as did his insistence that there is no supra-political authority to which an appeal against sovereign states can be made.

So far as the remaining essays are concerned, four themes emerge which are familiar features of Oakeshott's political philosophy. The first is Oakeshott's consistent refusal to allow that competence in political philosophy can confer a privileged position on would-be public intellectuals committed to normative guidance of their fellow citizens. It is this refusal which placed Oakeshott at odds with, for example, the aspirations of Walter Lippman, Oakeshott's review of whose *The Public Philosophy* (1955) Fuller has included. The second theme—which is merely the other side of the same coin—is Oakeshott's conviction that the task of political philosophy is entirely confined to explanation. As Oakeshott puts it, "where there is genuine philosophy, there can be no guidance; if we seek guidance, we must 'hang up philosophy'" (155). The third theme is Oakeshott's insistence on the need to distinguish his opposition to rationalism in politics from a defence of irrationalism, with which it was often confused. As Oakeshott wrote in a critical review included by Fuller of Hans Morgenthau's *Scientific Man Versus Power Politics* (1946), "the idea that human behaviour cannot be reduced to the interaction of the abstractions of rationalism is confused [by Morgenthau] with the idea that there are areas of human behaviour inherently impervious to rational analysis" (106). The fourth theme is Oakeshott's dismissive view of politics. Despite his praise of patriotism in the early essay already noticed, he wrote in "The Claims of Politics" (1939) that "political action involves mental vulgarity," not least because of "the false

simplification of life implied in even the best of its purposes” (93). Although in his late work he valued civic sentiment highly, political activity itself he always regarded with suspicion.

This paperback edition of Timothy Fuller’s volume is a welcome addition to the constantly growing corpus of Oakeshott’s published work.

REFERENCES

- Oakeshott, Michael. (1991). *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Press).
- Oakeshott, Michael. (2004). *What is History? and Other Essays*. Luke O’Sullivan (ed) (Exeter, UK: Imprint Academic).