



**Review: [Untitled]**

Reviewed Work(s):

*Religion and the Obligations of Citizenship* by Paul J. Weithman  
Alan Wolfe

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“The unique advantage this provides is the possibility of governing opinions without providing explanations or demonstrations” (p. 90). It is a covert means of instruction, which manipulates rather than enlightens the reader, and produces not knowledge but mere opinion.

The argument culminates in a novel interpretation of *Behemoth* that draws our attention to the dialogue form of this history of the Civil War. The work was completed in 1668, some 17 years after the publication of *Leviathan*. It is commonly read as a case study illustrating the application of Hobbes’s theory to the immediate case. However, Vaughn observes, the standard view ignores the dramatic style of the work, in which an older protagonist, A, educates the younger B about the war. Taking seriously the dialogue form, Vaughn draws the conclusion that *Behemoth* is “an example of how to educate someone through the medium of history” (p. 133). It illustrates “how to produce a docile people—a Behemoth and not another Long Parliament—which is capable of being turned, with sufficient skill, into a Leviathan” (p. 134).

It is an imaginative and thought-provoking interpretation of *Behemoth*, which leads one to question the very nature of the work. A good commentary should do this. A very good commentary will pair such imaginative insight with a cogent account of authorial intentions. Vaughn himself emphasizes the importance of this in an opening critique of other commentaries for their insufficient attention to Hobbes’s intentions. He charges, for instance, that in Skinner’s work, “both the initial observation and the procedure for explanation are external,” and so it is “Skinner, as an observer, [who] formulates both the problem and the solution. Neither were prompted by Hobbes” (pp. 4–5). Yet his own interpretation seems vulnerable to the same complaint, inasmuch, as Vaughn admits, “[t]he rhetoric of history can be drawn out from the implications of several of Hobbes’s arguments. The possible construction of such a technique, of course, does not prove that Hobbes ever recognized it as an implication of his arguments” (p. 89).

His reading of *Behemoth* also gives the appearance of being an interpretative construction. There is a simpler possible explanation for the dialogue form of the work, which Vaughn notes but dismisses. In old age, Hobbes used the genre for several works, including the *Dialogue . . . of the Common Laws* (1666) and three appendices to the Latin *Leviathan* (1668) (pp. 107–8). It may well be that *Behemoth* was composed as a dialogue simply because this was a genre favored by

Hobbes in the period. Sometimes authorial intentions are simpler and more straightforward than interpretive constructions.

Interpretation, to borrow from Hans Georg Gadamer, is inevitably a melding of the horizon of the work with that of the reader. Despite insisting on the importance of the former, *Behemoth Teaches Leviathan* ends up being more Vaughn than Hobbes.

**Religion and the Obligations of Citizenship.** By Paul J. Weithman. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. 227p. \$55.00.

— Alan Wolfe, *Boston College*

Should citizens of a liberal democracy who are religious put aside their convictions when they vote or offer arguments on behalf of the positions they hold? Many political philosophers believe that they should. Paul Weithman insists that no such requirement should be imposed upon them.

Weithman’s main concern is with writers who argue on behalf of intelligibility or accessibility as a precondition for liberal democratic debate and discourse. From their point of view, disagreement will be inevitable, especially over such highly contentious moral issues as abortion or stem cell research. To prevent democracy from deteriorating into potentially ugly war, all citizens, according to what he calls the “standard view” on these questions, ought to be able to justify the positions they hold in terms that their opponents can at least understand, and their opponents are required to do the same.

In some forms, the criterion of intelligibility would seem to rule out strongly held religious convictions on the grounds that they are motivated by revelation rather than reason. People of faith cannot always provide reasons for their views that will be intelligible to the secular. But many dangers would follow, Weithman believes, if we were to conclude that their opinions should not count or should count less than others.

To demonstrate why this is the case, the author turns first to empirical findings about how religion actually works in the United States, even while acknowledging the reluctance of political philosophers to shift the grounds of their arguments from ideal standards to actual reality. He points out, for example, that those who hold to the standard position often do this themselves, since they are often at pains to show how religious extremists stand in opposition to public reason. Making good use of many empirical studies, most particularly Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry Brady’s *Voice*

*and Equality* (1995), Weithman demonstrates the degree to which religion serves as a source of political mobilization and thus as a contributor to democratic health. He also documents the ways in which religious motivations often produce outcomes favorable to the least advantaged. Besides, he asks at one point (echoing political philosopher Nancy Rosenblum), are we not better off wanting religious believers to be encouraged to participate, thereby moderating their views, than to be effectively alienated from democracy’s rules of the game?

The bulk of *Religion and the Obligations of Citizenship*, however, is not concerned with empirical findings but with a closely reasoned argument challenging the two writers who, in Weithman’s opinion, have offered the best defense of the standard view: Robert Audi and John Rawls. Because the arguments Weithman advances are complex, I will not try to summarize them here. It suffices to say that he is a minimalist when it comes to establishing the obligations citizens can be expected to fulfill so that their reasons meet the criteria of liberal democracy. He defends the position that it is sufficient that citizens have reasons that are comprehensible to themselves, and he finds more demanding conceptions unable to meet all the criteria they themselves establish.

Weithman’s book is an important contribution to an important debate, and it will be viewed as an essential text among those who find fault with the approaches of books like Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson’s *Democracy and Disagreement* (1996) or Stephen Macedo’s *Liberal Virtues* (1990). Remarkably fair-minded in spite of the contentious issues with which he is concerned, Weithman writes as someone strongly attracted to liberal theory yet without the suspicion of faith that can often be found in those precincts.

I have only one complaint with this otherwise stimulating book. Liberals are not the only writers who sometimes treat religious believers as less than full citizens of their society. The same could be said of theologians like Stanley Hauerwas or the literary theorist Stanley Fish. Hauerwas’s treatment of believers as “resident aliens” and Fish’s argument that people of faith can never accept liberalism are ways of claiming that the faithful must live up to stronger obligations than the secular, even if they are motivated by sympathy with, rather than suspicion toward, religion. It would be fascinating to see how a philosopher as rigorous in argumentation and as clear in his formulations as Weithman would have treated them.