

Christians are destined to wield the hammer of Thor

The hammer of Thor reminds me of the power of any one of the Great Books. In the hands of an educated person, a Great Book can become a powerful weapon for changing the world. The rationale behind a liberal arts education is that young people must learn the appropriate way to wield the power of the Great Books.

In the first Thor movie, because of his arrogance, Thor is banished from Asgard by his father Odin. Thor must prove himself worthy of wielding the hammer, which is protected by an enchantment from



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being wielded by the unworthy. He becomes a hero when he learns his lesson.

Thor's story came to mind as I read the important new book by Grant Havers, *Leo Strauss and Anglo-American Democracy*, which makes an original contribution to the scholarly debate about Leo Strauss (1899-1973), a professor who became famous for the way he championed the Great Books of the classical

tradition.

Strauss's promotion of the study of Great Books is one reason he is usually seen by traditional conservatives as an ally in the defense of Western civilization. Readers with leftist sympathies, however, have accused Strauss of being an extremely subtle critic of liberal democracy. These readers attack him as a sneaky extremist who cleverly disguises a dangerous right-wing agenda.

Havers brilliantly cuts the Gordian knot of the debate to date over Strauss. After decades of carefully reading

the writings of Strauss and the scholarship about him, Havers achieves a breakthrough by refusing to get sucked into the ideological clash of the warring right-wing and left-wing interpretations of Strauss. Instead, he painstakingly explores the strange ways that Strauss made use of the Great Books.

In his detailed study, Havers shows how a proper understanding of Strauss must also place him in his historical context. This means seeing him as a Cold War liberal with a secular bias that embraced some typically leftist and modern ideas about Christianity. Oddly enough, Strauss championed the study of the classical tradition because he wanted to bypass Christianity and make a purely secular argument in defense of modern, liberal democracy.

For this reason, Strauss adopted a romanticized view of the classic philosophical books of a traditional liberal arts education. He saw Greek philosophy as articulating the eternal and universal ideas at the basis of liberal democracy. Therefore, to defend modern liberal democracy, Strauss thinks we need to see the Greeks as its purest champions, and to downplay the Christian contribution to its foundations.

Because the claims of the Christian revelation are historically particular (since they unfolded locally, in a specific time and place), Strauss mistrusts them as much too weak for the task of opposing global tyranny and defending the universal ideals of truth, justice, and democracy. For the philosophic Strauss, the universal must defeat the particu-

lar. Strauss thinks that to fight for modern liberal democratic freedoms under any banner of Christianity is an unseemly, unworthy strategy, destined to lose.

Havers takes on the enormous task of working through Strauss' extremely complex views and intricate arguments. With care and respect, he delineates how Strauss' great intelligence articulates interpretations that are always serious and never without interest. Yet the unmistakable conclusion of Havers' rigorous treatment is that the Straussian standpoint is ultimately unworthy for wielding the Great Books, to do battle with the dark forces of our age.

Havers demonstrates that this is because of Strauss' failure to arrive at a proper appreciation of the essential role of Christianity in the drama of history. In other words, the Straussian interpretation of the Great Books is unworthy for wielding the hammer of Thor. Ultimately, it takes "a conservative Christian" to do that—and here I use the same phrase that Havers uses in his book to identify himself and his convictions.

Havers' book contains many interesting case studies of thinkers attracted to Strauss and his keen reading of the Great Books. One of them is of Willmoore Kendall (1909-1967), an American conservative writer and political philosophy professor. Kendall became a Catholic late in life but always retained his "hinterland Protestant" convictions about the essential goodness of majority-rule democracy founded upon heartfelt virtue.

Kendall's populist defense

of democracy, visible in his book *The Basic Symbols of the American Political Tradition*, set him apart from other conservatives, both Catholic and Protestant. In Kendall's view, to see conservatism as defending a universal, unchanging, petrified tradition, and to downplay the historically specific, is a grave mistake. Kendall therefore rightly quarreled with Straussians on this point. These clashes remain instructive for conservatives to this very day, as Havers observes.

Kendall also quarreled over the importance of the Anglo-Protestant heritage in American conservatism with Russell Kirk, another conservative thinker who converted to Catholicism. Kirk emphasized the unchanging and transcendent dimensions of the tradition, but Kendall pointed out that because America's origins lay in revolution, conservatives should not dodge appreciating the significance of historically particular struggles.

Kirk called his most famous book *The Conservative Mind*, but Kendall furiously criticized him for it. Kendall argued that the correct title should be *The Anglo-American Conservative Mind*.

In his confrontation with the legacy of Strauss, the Asgardian Havers similarly displays his historical convictions in the title of an immensely learned book that proves him heroically worthy to wield the Great Books' hammer of Thor: *Leo Strauss and Anglo-American Democracy: A Conservative Critique*.

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