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John M. Finnis

Notre Dame Law School, john.m.finnis.1@nd.edu

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Truth and Complexity: Notes on Music and Liberalism

John Finnis*

Abstract: Simpson's *Political Illiberalism* restores to its proper place in political theory Plato's thesis that bad music imperils the whole culture and polity, a thesis ignored with utter recklessness in contemporary liberal practice and, for the most part, theory. But Simpson's elaboration of the thesis over-simplifies the characteristics of Bach's (and later) "modern" music that make it dangerous, somewhat in the way that the Providential "composing" of human history, with all its complexities, involves discord and danger. One such hazardous complexity is the addition of prophetic divine revelation ("Jerusalem") to the achievements of (divinely given) human reason exercised in natural science and philosophy ("Athens"). The eventual completion of revelation includes the lapidary "Render to Caesar . . ." formula, the two poles of which our *soi-disant* liberal doctrines about public good characteristically reduce to one. These Notes, complementary to Simpson's book, suggest that such a unilateral prioritizing of public peace over truth is inherently prejudicial to the political community's more fundamental common good, a common good prejudiced also by parallel failings at the ecclesiastical pole.

Keywords: Peter Simpson, Liberalism, Music, Revelation

I

These are notes on one of *Political Illiberalism's* central sets of theses: "[T]ruth is the goal of community, and its protection, or the protection of the search for it, belongs to the political power."¹ "[T]he fundamental form and character of community . . . is truth. . . . Liberalism, therefore . . . is intrinsically unnatural and intrinsically unjust, because it opposes the common good of community."² "If a divine revelation about the comprehensive truth has been given. . . in ways that natural reason is able to judge and recognize . . . then the teaching of this revelation naturally comes within the ambit of community life. Otherwise community would lose its orientation to comprehensive truth."³

* Biolchini Family Professor of Law, University of Notre Dame du Lac; Professor of Law and Legal Philosophy Emeritus, University of Oxford. Email: john.finnis@law.ox.ac.uk.

¹ *Political Illiberalism (PI)*, 78; "community is about the drive for comprehensive truth" (ibid., 83); "politics is the expression of the human drive for fullness of happiness and comprehension of the whole" (ibid., 69); "[community] is a striving for the comprehensive good" (ibid., 177).

² Ibid., 95.

³ Ibid., 103.

These notes do not formally assess these challenging theses' warrant. Instead they approach the theses at a tangent, *via* the book's brief discussion of music. For in its final chapter, "Illiberal Morals," Peter Simpson—after lucidly describing changes introduced into Western music by, above all, Bach, changes captured in the title of Bach's *The Well-Tempered Clavier*⁴—observes:

Now, these features of modern Western music, which are very much distinctive of it, namely the well-tempered scale and the dominance of the keyboard, are related to the desire for variety and multiplicity of sounds.⁵

And this desire, he says, "manifests itself also in Western music in another way, namely, in the love of novelty and the desire for ever different sorts and styles of music,"⁶ generating "a dizzying succession of novelties" such that, to gain attention, increasing resort must be made to the shocking.⁷ Hence his thesis about education in virtue:

The effect of this sort of music on the passions and emotions seems evident. These will tend towards the new, the shocking, or the violent; they will not tend toward the peaceful, the moderated, or the controlled.⁸

Hence the gravity of Simpson's concern: "modern Western music," that is including and since Bach, "seems capable now only of marginalizing or destroying and not of generating or enhancing" the moral virtues needed for "the human striving for the comprehensive good, which is the mark of all authentic community"—needed because such striving in practice requires "passions that serve thought and do not disrupt or distort it."⁹

The present commentary will question neither the truth of Simpson's premises, nor his conclusion about the power of music to weaken and deflect, even lethally, the elements of authentic community and human flourishing. It is good that he has taken up again a topic much neglected in political theory since Plato's discussion of it in *Laws* Books I and (in depth) II (not to mention *Republic* Book III), and generally ignored, if not contemptuously denied, by the masters of our liberal-theoretical culture.

II

Modern Western classical music holds out more than novelties (shocking or otherwise) and obvious pleasures. It offers also very greatly enhanced power, complexity, diversity and richness—both in itself, and in its capacity to re-enact or arouse or

⁴ 1722, a collection of preludes and fugues in all 24 major and minor keys, followed about 20 years later by a second collection of parallel content.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 202. The one corrigendum in Simpson's technical observations is his statement, *ibid.*, that the standard five-bar staff "allows one to write only twelve notes to an octave and only at evenly fixed intervals." In fact, composers use various notational adjustments to write as many notes as they need, and at such intervals as they thus specify.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 202-3.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 203.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 203.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 205.

create a wide gamut of emotions and dispositions of the human rational soul at all its levels. And if Bach begins his *St. John Passion* and his *B minor Mass* with a discord, his intention (it is reasonable to assume) is not to be novel or shocking but to say something that will preside over all that follows, evoking the bringing of good out of the depths of banal evil and extraordinary humiliation, pain and loss. Any novelty and obvious pleasure is a side effect, as is the risk that immoderate exploitation of such techniques, unmoored from authentic and profound insight and intention, will culturally submerge the worthwhile in the worthless.

Nor does modern Western music with its deployment of the “well-” or “equal-tempered” notation and tuning require elimination of alternatives. Music written for and played in “just intonation,” the alternative to “equal-tempered,” has its present-day practitioners and proponents. One of them, Kyle Gann, having remarked that “equal temperament chords do have a kind of active buzz to them, a level of harmonic excitement and intensity,” and that “by contrast, just-intonation chords are much calmer, more passive; you literally have to slow down to listen to them;”¹⁰ and having pointed out the technical basis for various subtleties of coloration unavailable in equal- (well-) tempered compositions, rendering them relatively (in film terms) black and white; concludes wryly:

Come to think of it, maybe you shouldn’t try just intonation—you’ll become unfit to live in the West, and have to move to India or Bali.¹¹

But when all is said and done, modern Western music neither banishes us to the East nor imprisons us in the West. It does, however, undoubtedly create risks of over-stimulation and de-sensitization.

III

In its complexity, its riches and its risks, our music resembles the Providential relationship between divine revelation and philosophy as it was (as in Aristotle or his master Plato) without benefit of revelation. The prophets of Israel proclaimed propositions—about the nature of Creation and about human freedom and justice—superior to Greek philosophy in penetration, and in approximation to the truth. And though the prophets were mostly opposed bitterly by the religious establishment, the latter had the eventual good sense to canonize them. Yet the prophets were easily misunderstood, and were capable of intoxicating their followers and later readers with misdirected apocalyptic fervor. Their anti-cyclical understanding of history, for example, was truer by far than the cyclical, but was exposed to gnostic exploitations of the kinds that Voegelin blamed the prophets for occasioning or causing right down to the late twentieth century.¹²

¹⁰ The same point is made by Simpson, *ibid.*, 204: we in the West have an abundance of obvious pleasures and a dearth of the subtle pleasures that non-Western music affords to those who devote to it the time and meditation required to appreciate it.

¹¹ Kyle Gann, “Just Intonation Explained” (1997), <http://www.kylegann.com/tuning.html> (accessed 3 February 2017).

¹² See, latterly, *Autobiographical Reflections in The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, vol. 34 (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 2006), 93-5.

The addition of Jerusalem to Athens is required by the claims of evidence and truth, as the philosophers Philo, reflecting in Alexandria without benefit of Christ, and Justin of Nablus, reflecting in Rome on what he well calls the memoirs of Christ's apostles, each concluded: revelation added *information* to the information that is data for philosophy's inferential additions. But the addition made by divine revelation raises the stakes. For—partly by and partly besides supplying information about the full sense of *metanoia* as change of orientation and life, a change opening out to eternal life (information about the Kingdom of God)—the content of revelation, as completed in Christ's words and deeds, creates new complexities and risks without eliminating the perennial risks identified by Plato and Aristotle in their well-informed reflections on the cycle of political forms and deviations.

There is undoubtedly a large current of political thought—call it,¹³ with Simpson, *liberalism*—that “in its very idea” denies public authority to a publicly revealed religion.¹⁴ Simpson goes a step further. Liberalism's claim to neutrality “is as much a myth here as it is everywhere else,” he says (and I agree). But he adds, in the next sentence: “To deny public authority to a public revelation is to deny that it is, after all, a public revelation.”¹⁵ And that final step goes too far.

For between affirmation and denial there is suspension of judgment, a suspension which might be motivated by justifiable or unjustifiable uncertainty, or by a concern not to overstep one's jurisdiction (province, authority. . .). And between A. “There has been public revelation,” as that term is understood in the central revelation,¹⁶ and B. “Public revelation has (in truth) public authority [in the resolution of political and legal issues in any well-ordered political community],” there is a gap: it is not evident that A cannot be affirmed without being rationally committed to affirming also B.

Indeed, since the public revelation completed in and by Christ affirms that, precisely in matters bearing on the commonalities of political community, “what belongs to God” is not to be confused with what “belongs to Caesar,”¹⁷ it seems reasonable to hold that a full acknowledgement of the truth of divine revelation, and of the revealed and philosophically accessible truths about human flourishing

¹³ For my strong reservations about employing the term “liberal(ism)” without clear, stipulative definition, *ad hoc*, see “Political Neutrality and Religious Arguments,” in *Religion and Public Reasons, Collected Essays: Vol. V* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 104n2; and “Catholic Positions in Liberal Debates, in *ibid.*, 113-4. But it is useful to have a term for the disposition to approach practical issues with the strong predisposition to resolve them without committing oneself to any substantive judgment(s) about what is truly good and what is not. Simpson of course supplies such a definition, cumulatively.

¹⁴ *PI*, 78.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 77.

¹⁶ “After God had spoken in many and various ways by the prophets . . . Jesus Christ completes the work of revelation and confirms it by divine testimony, by his whole presence and self-manifestation, by words and by deeds, by signs and miracles, but above all by his death and glorious resurrection from among the dead. . . The Christian dispensation, therefore, as a new and definitive covenant, will never pass away and *no new public revelation is to be expected* before the glorious manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ”: Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum*, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (1965), art. 4 (emphasis added).

¹⁷ Matt 22. 21; Lk 20. 25; Mk 12. 17. See Second Vatican Council, *Dignitatis Humanae*, Declaration on Religious Liberty (1965), art. 11 (quoting this), arts. 13-14.

and morality, is rationally compatible with holding that political authorities can be entitled, in their political capacities, to *suspend public judgment* about the question whether there has been a true divine revelation—to answer that question, publicly, with neither affirmation nor denial but suspension or withholding of judgment. True, such a stance very easily can be taken to be or entail a denial—that is, can easily be (mis)taken as an affirmation that all claims to identify a divine revelation are false. But such an interpretation is, as an inference, fallacious (though in a given case it might be the only reasonable conclusion from other evidence), and the making of fallacious inferences is a bad side effect to which any and every communication is exposed.

On the other hand, political authorities in a political community of persons who generally concur with each other (and with the truth) about the true bearers of divine revelation are entitled to conclude that concern to avoid bad side effects of that kind entitles them not to suspend judgment about that truth.¹⁸

Beyond these statements of principle, however, it is reasonable to think that the complexity of historically given circumstances and movements of thought and dispositions, a complexity partly arising from the data once Jerusalem is added to Athens (and *vice versa*), can often make suspension of public *political* judgment about the true revelation a reasonable response.

Elizabeth I, her successor James I, and their Puritan opponents in England (say 1590-1625) all thought that each political community or people *must* have one and only one religion.¹⁹ James and the Puritans each pushed the argument through to the conclusion that the ruling political authority must be absolute. Three hundred years later Carl Schmitt deploys a similar premise for his conclusion that there must in each state be an unfettered authority or power to deal with

¹⁸ See Finnis, *Religion and Public Reasons*, 99-102 (= "Religion and State: Some Main Issues and Sources," *American Journal of Jurisprudence* 51 (2006): 107-130, at 127-130). The conclusion is:

with the . . . duty firmly acknowledged as excluding positive religious tests for voting or other public office, and with the negative duties to abstain from coercion all firmly in place, it does not seem to be contrary either to what experience shows are the exigencies of authenticity in religious inquiry, or to what seem likely to be the conclusions of revelation as well as philosophy about limits to the state's coercive jurisdiction and temporal authority, to hold that in establishing their constitutional arrangements a people might without injustice or political impropriety record their solemn belief about the identity and name of the true religious faith and community.

Even when politically possible, making such a declaration might in many circumstances have such bad side effects that doing so would be unfair or otherwise unreasonable. And it would always be a quite unfitting declaration to make if the adherents of the religion so identified did not accept and act on the responsibility which I mentioned earlier, of showing how their faith embraces and is continuous with public philosophical, historical, and moral reason.

In that passage, "the state's coercive jurisdiction" refers to the coercive jurisdiction established by and for a political community (in *that* sense, not Simpson's, by and for a state) through its political authorities.

¹⁹ See Elizabeth's Proclamation of 5 November 1602 condemning the anti-Jesuit, pro-Government Catholic priests ("Appellants") for insinuating "that we have some purpose to grant toleration of two religions within our realm, where God . . . doth not only know our innocence from any such imagination, but how far it hath been from any about us once to offer to our ears the persuasion of such a course:" see Patrick Martin and John Finnis, "The Secret Sharers: 'Anthony Rivers' and the Appellant Controversy, 1601-2," *Huntingdon Library Quarterly* 69 (2005): 195-238, at 235.

emergencies and constitutional transmissions. The assumption shared by James, the Puritans and Schmitt is that a people cannot live civilly for long with ambiguity about what would happen *if* . . . But in truth it seems possible that a statesmanlike ambiguity about fundamentals may be preserved for decades, generations, even centuries.

IV

Responsibility for proclaiming and vindicating public revelation's public character rests not with the political authorities but with the ecclesiastical—with the *ekklelesia*, the assembly founded to carry revelation's content through history, disseminating that content along with the evidences of its divine source and rational authority. As long as that body does so, any reticence of the political authorities about revelation's existence, content and bearer need not have unacceptable bad side effects in the form of inferences that these authorities are denying what they do not assert. But if that political reticence is accompanied by ecclesiastical reticence or, more serious, ecclesiastical abdication in the face of denials that the evidences of revelation are sufficiently credible, then those inferences will be made. And their making will be part of a general reversal, and loss, of the community's orientation to (Simpson's shorthand) "comprehensive truth." And since that abdication has in fact been unfolding, not in²⁰ but since the Second Vatican Council, the inferences are being made and the general reversal and loss of orientation to the truth is upon us, in both the political community and, remarkably, the ecclesiastical.²¹

Providence has all along ordained that the unfolding of creation and then of human history will follow a course immensely more complex, and more marked by discords, dissonances, and shocking novelties than might have been predicted or favored by anyone alive to the possibilities and pleasures of harmony, resolution and just intonation. To say this is by no means to say that we should not wish our politics to be peaceful in purpose and methods. It is only to say that tempering our concern for peace with concern for justice and truth will have as side effects disharmony and other complexities liable—as is the way of the world²²—to outrun the capacities of even the most virtuous and blessed to contain and resolve them. And it is not to assert anything that Simpson's book commits him to denying or even doubting.

²⁰ *Dei Verbum*, arts. 18 and 19 say what needs to be said, and has been said from the beginning, about the faith's foundation upon the memories of the four Gospels' authors as (in two cases) eye-witnesses and (in two cases) associates of eye-witnesses of the words and deeds of Jesus of Nazareth.

²¹ See further John Finnis, "On Moyn's *Christian Natural Rights* (2015)," *King's College Law Journal* 28 (2017): 1–9, at 4, 6–9.

²² See 2 *Peter* 3. 10–13.