

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO
DEPARTMENT FOR THE STUDY OF RELIGION

RLG446S/RLG3623S
POL484S/POL2026S

2023-24

THE THOUGHT OF LEO STRAUSS:
PHILOSOPHY, THEOLOGY, AND POLITICS

Kenneth Hart Green

Seminar: Wednesdays 2-4

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Office Hour: Wed 12-1

The course offers an introduction to the philosophic thought of Leo Strauss (1899-1973), approached through his writings on modern Judaism. Strauss was one of the most significant Jewish thinkers, as well as one of the most significant political philosophers, of the twentieth century. To be dealt with are such topics and questions as: the crisis of modernity--progress or return?; Spinoza and the origins of modern Judaism, Zionism, liberal democracy, and biblical criticism; scientific-philosophic refutation of biblical orthodoxy vs. the continued validity of revelation; Nietzsche and the problem of radical historicism; Maimonides rediscovered; the perennial conflict between Jerusalem and Athens; persecution and the art of writing; reconsidering the cognitive value of the Hebrew Bible. We will also compare Strauss's views on such topics and questions with the views of some of his contemporaries, such as: Martin Heidegger, Alexandre Kojève, Karl Löwith, Gershom Scholem, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Eric Voegelin, George Grant, and Emil Fackenheim.

By considering some of Strauss's key works, while also referring to the texts he studied carefully, we will delve into some of the basic themes in the history of Jewish thought, of philosophical theology, and of political philosophy. In addition, readings in some of the leading contemporary students and interpreters of Strauss's works will be examined.

Prerequisite:

Permission of the professor. I would like to discuss with all prospective members of the class what their previous

studies have been concentrated on, so as to ensure that they are more or less appropriately prepared for this advanced course.

RLG446S/RLG3623S
POL484S/POL2026S

2.

2023-24

A. COURSE BASICS

Required Texts:

Leo Strauss,
JEWISH PHILOSOPHY AND THE CRISIS OF MODERNITY:
ESSAYS AND LECTURES IN MODERN JEWISH THOUGHT
Edited with an Introduction by K.H. Green
(Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997).

The one required book has been ordered, and should be available, at the U of T Bookstore, at the corner of College & St. George.

Recommended Texts:

Leo Strauss,
PHILOSOPHY AND LAW:
CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE UNDERSTANDING OF MAIMONIDES
AND HIS PREDECESSORS
Translated by Eve Adler
(Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995).

Leo Strauss,
NATURAL RIGHT AND HISTORY
(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971).

Leo Strauss,
ON TYRANNY (Revised and Augmented Edition)
Edited by Victor Gourevitch and Michael S. Roth
(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

Copies of these three books are on order at the U of T Bookstore; copies are also on short-term loan in Robarts Library.

Course Requirements:

- (1) Class presentations and participation;
- (2) Two papers (approx. 8-10 pp. each).

Course Work Value:

First Paper = 30%;
Second Paper = 40%;
Participation = 30%.

RLG446S/RLG3623S
POL484S/POL2026S

3.

2023-24

B. LIST OF READINGS AND DISCUSSION TOPICS

- 1/ Introduction: What manner of thinker is Leo Strauss?
(i.e., Who is afraid of Leo Strauss?, and why?)
- 2/ "Progress or Return?": The meaning, the value, and the hope of progress; is it a reliable or a necessary standard?; is any sound alternative to it available in the modern era?; what limits can be set to belief in the idea of progress?
- 3/ "Preface to Spinoza's Critique of Religion."
The two types of Jewish thinkers in the modern era, & how their differences reflect the fundamental modern dilemma.
- 4/ "How to Study Spinoza's Theologico-Political Treatise."
Modern science, miracles, biblical criticism, liberal democracy, & esotericism: the moral difficulties to which we have been led by these.
- 5/ "Preface to Isaac Husik, Philosophical Essays."
What is 'Jewish philosophy'? Is Jewish philosophy possible in the modern era? How are Judaism and philosophy related?
- 6/ "Introductory Essay to Hermann Cohen, Religion of Reason."
The emergence of an authentic modern Jewish theology; what is its status as knowledge? how crucial is faith?
- 7/ "Freud on Moses and Monotheism."
The dialectics of enlightenment, or, is something 'religious' hidden beneath modern rationalism, atheism & secularism?
- 8/ "Why We Remain Jews: Can Jewish Faith and History Still

Speak to Us?."

A history of the 'impossible'? What remains in the wake of modernity? Are modernity and tradition in contradiction?

RLG446S/RLG3623S
POL484S/POL2026S

4.

2023-24

- 9/ "On the Interpretation of Genesis."
What possible present proof is available for the existence of God and of creation? Are miracles possible or knowable? Is the Bible still relevant, or even somehow imperative, for a secular society and modern people? Or is the true concern at issue whether an altogether *secular* modernity is still valid or defensible?
- 10/ "Jerusalem and Athens."
How are civilization and piety two very different things?; why do they remain in conflict?
- 11/ "Introduction to Persecution and the Art of Writing."
Prophetic religion versus the life of the free mind, or, freethinking and the moral order: unavoidable conflict?
- 12/ "Perspectives on the Good Society."
What is the proper order, and what is the proper account, of the human good in relation to the divine good?

C. PAPER ASSIGNMENTS

FIRST PAPER:

Due Date: **Wednesday, February 28, 2024**

Length: 6-8 pages (typed and double-spaced)

Topic: Write an analysis of the chapter in JP&CM on which you will be doing your presentation. Be sure to bring to light as clearly, simply, and succinctly as possible the gist of Strauss's argument in the chapter. Also, (1) fit the chapter into an overview of the purpose of JP&CM

as you understand it; (2) relate it to other works by Strauss insofar as they are relevant; and (3) if applicable, make reference to the work on which Strauss is writing and how he approaches it.

RLG446S/RLG3623S
POL484S/POL2026S

5.

2023-24

SECOND PAPER:

Due Date: **Wednesday, April 3, 2024**

Length: 8-10 pages (typed and double-spaced)

Topic: **EITHER:**

Write a critical essay which compares and contrasts the views of Leo Strauss with those of one of the thinkers whose views Strauss criticized, or with whom he debated, e.g., Martin Heidegger, Eric Voegelin, Alexandre Kojève, Karl Löwith, Gershom Scholem, Carl Schmitt, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Sigmund Freud, Julius Guttmann, or Isaac Husik.

OR:

Write a critical interpretive essay of one work by a contemporary student or interpreter of Leo Strauss, such as Allan Bloom, Stanley Rosen, Harry Jaffa, Thomas Pangle, Kenneth Green, Heinrich Meier, Daniel Tanguay, Laurence Lampert.

OR:

Write a critical interpretive review of one major work by Leo Strauss, such as Spinoza's Critique of Religion, Philosophy and Law, or Natural Right and History.

All paper topics should be discussed with the professor, and must be approved prior to proceeding with them.