

INTRODUCTION TO MODERN JEWISH THOUGHT

Religion 373 Spring 2006
Steven M. Wasserstrom
Office hours: MW 2-3:30 and by appt.

Course Time: M-W-F 1:10-2:00 in ETC 208

This is how one pictures the angel of history:
Where we perceive a chain of events,
He sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling
Wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet.

The angel would like to stay...and
make whole what has been smashed.
But a storm is blowing from Paradise;
This storm irresistably propels him into the
future to which his back is turned.

This storm is what we call progress.

Walter Benjamin, 1940

Hope for a future time of perfection constitutes a leading theme in Modern Jewish thought. The idea of the future, whether construed in secular terms as utopia, communism or Zionism or expressed as a traditional belief in the messiah, whether Orthodox or Lubavitcher, is a feature shared by otherwise disparate sectors of Jewish thought, and therefore is a useful object of study in understanding the range of 20th century thinking as expressed in a Judaic idiom.

This course has been occasioned by the publication of Pierre Bouretz, *Temoins du futur: philosophie et messianisme* (Paris: Gallimard, 2003). Bouretz examines the relation between messianism and philosophy in the thought of Herman Cohen, Franz Rosenzweig, Walter Benjamin, Gershom Scholem, Leo Strauss, Hans Jonas, Martin Buber and Emmanuel Lévinas. This is not a course in philosophy, however, but rather in the critical study of religion. Therefore, while Bouretz chose well, our concern lies not with this set of thinkers, or at least not with them alone. Nor will we attempt to be comprehensive. Rather, *the future as a problem for religion* is our subject.

Our materials will derive from Marxist, Zionist, neo-Kantian, Lubavitcher, and other sources, in addition to those of philosophers and theologians. *Our question* will be this. What does this orientation to the future mean? Why is it a central feature not only of Jewish thought (Cohen, Bloch, et. al.) but also of Jewish social organization (Chabad, Hareidi, et. al.)? And our specific *intellectual project* is this. How do we make sense of our question from the perspective of religious studies? Our approach, broadly speaking, will be *the history of religious ideas*. What were the social elements that formed the thought or informed the organization of contemporary Jewish messianism? What was the impact of the Shoah and the consequent establishment of the State of Israel? Resources to be studied for understanding our problem will include secondary literature on apocalypticism, fundamentalism, millenarianism, secularization and related issues.

Course requirements are comprised of four parts:

1. *Two analytic papers on primary themes.* 10 pages.

Themes may include philosophical conception, for example Cohens neoKantian idea of the future; *Kabbalah*, for example, Moshe Idel's *Messianic Mystics* or Scholem's theory of Sabbatian stimulation of modernity; or they may address a central idea, figure, or moment. In any case these papers will be neither close reading nor major research assignments, though they should do both research and close reading. In all cases they must *identify and analyze a discrete problem* of the future for modern Jewish thought.

2. *One major research assignment.* 25-30 pages.

This paper will be due a week after completion of semester classes. A detailed assignment sheet will be distributed.

note: Research resources for this course will be of three sorts:

1. traditional library research, for which Heather Whipple will be our guide
2. specialized in-house materials
3. online research

note: Late papers will not be accepted, with no exceptions other than a written note from the Dean of Students Service's office.

3. *Active Participation in the conference organism* will also be required.

The "conference organism" is a biological metaphor for the interactive cooperation of all members. This organism will be self-directed by means of roles chosen by members of the conference, and will be overseen by the instructor and the Honor Principle.

elements of organismic excellence include

- a. contribution to a course blog
- b. peer critique of analysis paper precis
- c. presentations of major research precis to the conference (no more than 20 minutes)
- d. providing, from the assigned readings, lead questions at the beginning of one conference

4. *Reading assigned texts and participation in conference discussion* are required. Note that additional readings related to the assigned texts will be circulated electronically and/or in hard copy throughout the term. These are to be brought to the group both by the instructor and by the conferees.

Required Texts:

Berger, David. *The Rebbe, the Messiah, and the scandal of Orthodox indifference*. Portland, OR: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2001.

Bloch, Ernst. *The Spirit of Utopia*. Trans. Anthony Nassar. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000.

Cohen, Hermann. *Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism*. Trans. Simon Kaplan. New York: F. Ungar, 1972.

Jacoby, Russell. *Picture Imperfect: utopian thought for an anti-utopian age*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005.

Lenowitz, Harris. *The Jewish Messiahs: from Galilee to Crown Heights*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.¹

Ravitzky, Aviezer. *Messianism, Zionism, and Jewish religious radicalism*. Trans. M. Swirsky and J. Chipman. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.

Scholem, Gershom. *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and other essays on Jewish spirituality*. New York: Schocken Books, 1995.

Steiner, George. *Nostalgia for the Absolute*. Anansi, 2004.

SECTION ONE: BACKGROUND TO MESSIAHS AND MESSIANISM

Week 1

Monday, January 23

Introduction and orientation

Wednesday, January 25

Read: Scholem, Gershom. *The Messianic Idea*, 1-37, 49-78

Lenowitz, 3-23

SECTION TWO: BACKGROUND TO JEWISH PHILOSOPHY

We will study the *history of Jewish philosophy* by way of preparation.

Friday, January 27

Read: Samuelson, *Jewish Philosophy*, pp. 1-79

¹ Available in its entirety online; search for the title through the Summit catalog to link to it (must be at a Reed terminal or logged in via proxy server).

Week 2

Monday, January 30

Read: : Samuelson, *Jewish Philosophy*, pp. 79-143

Wednesday, February 1

Read: : Samuelson, *Jewish Philosophy*, pp. 143-175

Friday, February 3

Read: : Samuelson, *Jewish Philosophy*, pp. 175-223

Week 3

Monday, February 6

Read: : Samuelson, *Jewish Philosophy*, pp. 241-295, 322-335

SECTION THREE: COHEN'S RELIGION OF REASON

Wednesday, February 8

Read: Scholem, *The Messianic Idea*, 49-78

Friday, February 10

Read: Scholem, *The Messianic Idea*, 282-304

FIRST PAPER DUE/ PRECIS PEER REVIEW OF PAPER ARGUMENTS

Week 4

Monday, February 13

Read: Cohen, *Religion of Reason*, essays by Schwarzschild, Seeskin, Strauss

Wednesday, February 15

Read: Cohen, *Religion of Reason*, 1-59

Friday, February 17

Read: Cohen, *Religion of Reason*, 236-295

Week 5

Monday, February 20

Read: Cohen, *Religion of Reason* 1-49

Wednesday, February 22

Read: Cohen, *Religion of Reason*, 50-100

Friday, February 24

Read: Cohen, *Religion of Reason*, 100-165

Week 6

Monday, February 27

Read: Cohen, *Religion of Reason* 165-236

SECTION FOUR: SECULAR UTOPIA

Wednesday, March 1

Read: Bloch, Ernst. *The Spirit of Utopia*. 1-34

Friday, March 3

Read: Bloch, Ernst. *The Spirit of Utopia*. 165-233

Week 7

Monday, March 6

Read: Bloch, Ernst. *The Spirit of Utopia*. 233-279

Wednesday, March 8

Read: Jacoby, Russell. *Picture Imperfect*, 1-37

Friday, March 10

Read: Jacoby, Russell. *Picture Imperfect*, , 37-83

SECOND PAPER DUE/ PRECIS PEER REVIEW OF PAPER ARGUMENTS

March 11 – March 19: SPRING BREAK, NO CLASS

Week 8

Monday, March 20

Read: Jacoby, Russell. *Picture Imperfect*, 83-113

Wednesday, March 22

Read: Jacoby, Russell. *Picture Imperfect*, 113-145

Friday, March 24

Read: Steiner, George. *Nostalgia for the Absolute*, all

SECTION FIVE: MESSIAHS AND MESSIANISM

Week 9

Monday, March 27

Read: Lenowitz, Harris. *The Jewish Messiahs*, 23-125

Wednesday, March 29

Read: Lenowitz, Harris. *The Jewish Messiahs* 125-199,

Scholem, Gershom. *The Messianic Idea*, 37-49

Friday, March 31

Read: Scholem, Gershom. *The Messianic Idea*, 176-203

Lenowitz, Harris. *The Jewish Messiahs*, 199-263

SECTION SIX: THE CONTEMPORARY SCENE

Week 10

Monday, April 3

Read: Ravitzky, Aviezer. *Messianism, Zionism*, 1-40

Wednesday, April 5

Read: Ravitzky, Aviezer. *Messianism, Zionism*, 40-79

Friday, April 7

Read: Ravitzky, Aviezer. *Messianism, Zionism*, 79-145

Week 11

Monday, April 10

Read: Ravitzky, Aviezer. *Messianism, Zionism* 145-180

Wednesday, April 12

Read: Ravitzky, Aviezer. *Messianism, Zionism* 181-206

Thursday, April 13: PASSOVER

Friday, April 14

Read: Berger, David. *The Rebbe, the Messiah* 1-41

Week 12

Monday, April 17

Read: Berger, David. *The Rebbe, the Messiah* 41-76

Wednesday, April 19

Read: Berger, David. *The Rebbe, the Messiah* 76-111

Friday, April 21

Read: Berger, David. *The Rebbe, the Messiah*, 111-149

SECTION SEVEN: IMPLICATIONS FOR RELIGIOUS STUDIES

Finally, we shall attempt to apply our work, in the end, to the end itself, that is, to *our* future. In other words, what does this 20th century thought and action tell us about Jewish strategies for the 21st century, for understanding present Jewish thought in a post-9.11 world? In the final section of the course, then, we will attempt to understand implications of digitalization, globalization, all the revolutions that together are utterly transforming the social landscape, in so far as they speak to Jewish messianism. For example, the so-called 2012 movement currently anticipates some kind of global event to occur in the year 2012; “noosphere” ideologies descending from the work of Teilhard de Chardin; the “Temple Mount” movement; the progressive secular notion of *Tikkun Olam*; “Messianic Zionism”; Chabad belief in their Rebbe’s Messianic status; and the postmodern phenomenon of “Textual Reasoning.”

Week 13

Monday, April 24

Read: TBA

Wednesday, April 26

Read: TBA

Friday, April 28 [LAST DAY OF CLASSES]

POST-SCRIPT:

The Messiah will come only on the day after his arrival...
Franz Kafka