

Suggested Lecture Topics

Jewish Themes

Spinoza and American Democracy. Baruch Spinoza was a 17th century Jewish philosopher who was brought up as an orthodox Jew in Amsterdam. He became a scholar of European philosophy, especially that of Rene Descartes, and developed a unique point of view with regard to the relationship between religion and government that influenced the English philosopher John Locke, who, in turn, had a significant influence on Thomas Jefferson, James Madison and many of the Founders of American democracy.

Maimonides in the World of Islam. Moses Maimonides, a 12th century Jewish rabbi, philosopher and leader of the Jewish community in Egypt, lived his entire life under Islamic influence in Spain and North Africa and it is fascinating to observe how it influenced him and how he in turn left his mark on Islamic philosophy as well.

Moses Mendelsohn and the Jewish Enlightenment. Mendelsohn was a pivotal figure in the Jewish Enlightenment in the 18th Century and in the European Enlightenment. His life and writings forced others to take Jews seriously and be seen as complete human beings after centuries of degradation.

Martin Buber's Zionism and Jewish Existentialism. Martin Buber was a very significant 20th century Jewish philosopher and activist. His philosophy is studied along with that of Kierkegaard, Sartre, Camus and others as a subtle and extremely positive expression of Existentialist philosophy. He was also a Zionist and my lecture will explore the relation of his philosophy to his love for Israel and the Jewish people.

ISIS and Hannah: Jihadism in Light of Hannah Arendt's "The Origins of Totalitarianism." Hannah Arendt, a great 20th century Jewish philosopher, developed an understanding of totalitarianism via her experience with and thinking about the Nazis and Stalinism. My lecture explores her life and her writings which are found to illuminate our understanding of totalitarian movements prevailing today in the Middle East.

The Spectrum of Jewish Thinking, Belief and Practice. Many people think of Judaism as a singular religion with specific beliefs and practices. In fact, Judaism, like all religions, exists on a wide spectrum of belief and practice, from the strictly orthodox who wish to re-build the temple in Jerusalem to secular Jews who have no religious belief or practice, and everything in between. The lecture explores this spectrum and discusses the varieties of the Jewish experience.

Jewish Philosophy since the Shoah. A number of profound philosophical thinkers have emerged since the Holocaust in Europe and America. My lecture explores some of them as they attempt to make sense of this senseless tragedy.

Philo and the Greeks. Philo was an ancient, first century, Jewish philosopher who tried to relate Jewish thought with that of the Greeks, especially Plato. My lecture discusses his ideas and whether they had an influence on Jewish thought that came after, including that of today.

The Kabbala: Jewish Mysticism. What is often referred to as “Normative Judaism” actually incorporates quite a bit of mysticism that was developed by Kabbalists over the centuries, especially during the Middle Ages in Europe. It is fascinating to look at this tradition and how it influenced Judaism in general.

Other Religious and Philosophical Topics

The Spectrum of Christian (or Islamic, or Hindu, or Buddhist) Thinking, Belief and Practice. As noted above in my lecture on the spectrum of Judaism, most people think each religion is one consistent religion. But it turns out that each of these religions is really many religions under one umbrella. Recognizing this spectrum can give us greater understanding of the world today. You can choose which of these religions you would like the lecture to focus on.

Marx and the Marxists. Karl Marx developed what he thought of as a “scientific” analysis of human history that in itself was a gross simplification of reality and was then simplified and distorted further by Lenin, Stalin, et al. The lecture brings out the essence of Marx’s own thought and how it has been simplified and distorted by so-called “Marxists” ever since.

Fascism and Communism: Much Closer Than We May Have Thought. In the first half of the 20th century Fascists and Communists appeared to be at odds, or even opposites, but they actually had a lot in common, and they still do today. My lecture utilizes recent research into these movements by such writers as Hannah Arendt, Francois Furet, Timothy Snyder and others.

Western and Eastern Visions of the Evolution of the Human Organism. Hindu-Yoga philosophy, Taoism and Buddhism have more in common with Western philosophy as exemplified by such philosophers as Plato, Aristotle, Spinoza and others than we often realize, and it is enlightening to compare and contrast them. The lecture brings this out and shows their relevance to people today.

Mystic Christianity. Christianity has its Cabbala ... usually spelled with a “C” as opposed to a “K”, its mystic side. And, in fact, as Christianity was forming in the first few centuries of the Common Era, mystic Christianity often prevailed over what later became what we think of as orthodox Christianity. The lecture explores this side of the religion and how contemporary Christians continue to express it in various ways.

Mystic Islam. This is what is called Sufism, and is so different from what we normally think of as Islam that it can amaze us. The lecture discusses the essential beliefs and practices of the

Sufis, how they are viewed by other Muslims, and how they have influenced what we think of as “normative” Islam.

Augustine’s Influence of the Protestant Reformation. Saint Augustine, the great Catholic philosopher of the 4th and 5th centuries, actually had a tremendous influence on Luther and Calvin’s Protestant break from the Catholic Church in the 16th century. My lecture discusses aspects of his philosophy that was adopted by the leaders of the Protestant Reformation.

Holy War and Peace in Islam, Christianity and Judaism. People of all three of these religions lived together in peace at various times and for various periods, and all three developed theories and practices of holy war as well. The lecture discusses the times when they were at peace, the times of “convivencia,” and the times when they were in conflict.

You Pick

I can develop a talk on many other topics if given some time, so if you or your group has a special philosophical or religious idea, let’s discuss it.

Lectures run for approximately 40 minutes with 20 minutes left over for Q and A.

Fees are negotiable.