

A more general way in which R.'s personal thrust may undermine her own ideal of "conversation" is the minimal treatment of the discussion that has indeed been ongoing on each of these topics for decades. Assuredly, she makes general reference to the contemporary biblical scholarship that has made possible the new interpretations that she carefully presents in every chapter. She also makes extensive use of official church documents, especially illustrating the degree to which change has always been part of the Catholic relationship to doctrine. Despite some references to other authors, however, she is less diligent in acknowledging that her key arguments are generally common ones, raised and answered repeatedly by theologians and other scholars across the academic and ecclesial/political spectrum. The laudable goal of not overburdening the general audience with multiple references to scholarly debates helps explain this approach. Still, it is disappointing not to find in R.'s bibliography even previous works with an aim and audience quite similar to hers, such as Philip Kaufman's popular *Why You Can Disagree and Remain a Faithful Catholic*, or John Noonan's subtly argued and carefully documented *A Church That Can and Cannot Change*.

Throughout the book and in a most articulate conclusion, R. presents a well-structured summary of reasons why the Church, in the United States and elsewhere, continues to struggle to regain credible teaching authority among many of its people. On its own, this work is unlikely to advance the discussion much further, but R. and those longing with her for "necessary conversation" might take heart that, in the age of Pope Francis, *listening* may again become fashionable.

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*Leo Strauss on Maimonides: The Complete Writings*. Edited by Kenneth Hart Green. Chicago: University of Chicago, 2013. Pp. xxxv + 654. \$45.

*Leo Strauss and the Rediscovery of Maimonides*. By Kenneth Hart Green. Chicago: University of Chicago, 2013. Pp. ix + 207. \$35.

Moses Maimonides (1135–1204), the "Rambam," occupies a unique role in the history of Judaism, as both a revered codifier of Jewish law in his *Mishneh Torah* and as the author of the controversial (in its time) *Guide to the Perplexed*, which brought Judaism into direct confrontation with the teachings of Aristotle and the Islamic philosopher Farabi. Whereas the *Mishneh Torah* was written in clear and direct form, the *Guide*, by its author's acknowledgment, was composed in accord with a complex plan such that only the most acute and diligent reader could unlock its true meaning. The influence of the *Guide* transcended the Jewish world, most notably through Maimonides's contribution to Thomas Aquinas's endeavor to "synthesize" reason and revelation. Yet by the early twentieth century, Maimonides's reputation as both theologian and philosopher (as distinguished from legal commentator) had declined, owing largely to the "higher" biblical criticism initiated by Spinoza, which

seemed to relegate the earlier writer to a “medieval” outlook that had been permanently surpassed by the Enlightenment.

The thinker most fully responsible for restoring Maimonides’s intellectual reputation over the past century, albeit among a limited audience, was the great (and no less controversial) scholar-philosopher Leo Strauss (1899–1973). Strauss was driven to reconsider the thought of the Rambam as well as his teacher Farabi when he became aware of the intellectual crisis in which the Enlightenment had culminated (a crisis both dissected and radicalized by Nietzsche and Heidegger), with particularly problematic consequences for the intellectual and political status of Judaism. Strauss’s philosophic studies range from the ancient writers Xenophon, Aristophanes, and Thucydides as well as Plato and Aristotle, through Farabi and other medievals, to such modern philosophers as Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, Spinoza, Rousseau, and Nietzsche. The most controversial aspect in S.’s approach was his rediscovery of the practice of “esoteric writing” engaged in by each of the aforementioned authors, but about which he first learned from Maimonides and Farabi.

The original premise of esoteric writing is the opposite from that on which the Enlightenment was founded. That is, the greatest classical and medieval thinkers denied the assumption that there is a simple harmony between philosophic reason and political society as a whole, such that it is in the interest of philosophy as well as the public to openly reveal the philosophers’ doubts about popular religious, moral, and political beliefs. Rather, they regarded it as an act of the highest political and moral responsibility that the philosopher write in such a manner as to convey his deepest thoughts only to the philosophic (or potentially philosophic) few among his readers, while concealing the potentially morally corrosive implications of those thoughts from the public at large. (By contrast, the modern philosophers who practiced esoteric writing did so only to protect themselves from persecution under nonliberal political regimes, and thus made it easier for members of the public to decipher their real thoughts.)

Green, author of a previous book on the “return to Maimonides” in Strauss’s work as well as editor of a collection of Strauss’s essays on modern Jewish thought, has performed an enormous service for scholars of both theology and philosophy by publishing the two books under review here. *The Complete Writings* exhibits the fruits of Strauss’s nearly lifelong concern with Maimonides, from a chapter on Spinoza’s critique of Maimonides drawn from Strauss’s 1930 book *Die Religionskritik Spinozas* through three “notes” that Strauss prepared in 1967/68 on Maimonides’s *Book of Knowledge*, *Treatise on the Art of Logic*, and *Letter on Astrology*. It includes a half-dozen lectures and notes that remained unpublished during Strauss’s lifetime. The writings on Maimonides are bracketed by Strauss’s 1944 lecture on “How to Study Medieval Philosophy” and his 1937 essay on Abravanel, whom G. terms “The Last Medieval Maimonidean.” The volume also includes an 87-page editor’s introduction, surveying the readings and culminating in the suggestion that Strauss shared with Maimonides the belief that while the tension between reason and revelation could never be entirely obliterated, their “common search for the one truth” might bring them “ever closer to this noble goal” (87). Besides highly useful annotations of Strauss’s writings, G. adds helpful bibliographic information at the end.

In *The Rediscovery of Maimonides* G. retraces the steps by which Strauss originally “aimed at the advancement of knowledge about Maimonides” (2) only for help in clarifying the issues raised by Immanuel Kant and Moses Mendelssohn in their eighteenth-century debate over the question, What is “enlightenment?” G. believes that since this question had been inadequately treated by Spinoza and the twentieth-century Kantian Maimonides scholar Hermann Cohen, Strauss was driven to “rediscover[r] a veritable lost” intellectual “continent” entailing “an entirely different history of Western thought,” as well as “an entirely different Maimonides” from the conventional ones (1–2). G. goes so far as to suggest that Maimonides, in Strauss’s view, was “almost the unacknowledged legislator of the modern Western tradition,” not only for Jews, but “just as much for Western Christians derived from Thomas Aquinas” (127). Rather than being a relic of bygone times, Strauss discovered, Maimonides’s thought “anticipated several of the key critical thoughts in which modernity was rooted,” even as he avoided “the most common error of the moderns, from Machiavelli to Heidegger,” namely, the attempt to circumvent rather than take seriously the tension between Athens and Jerusalem (3).

In his effort to demonstrate the continuing vitality of Maimonides’s thought, G. observes that Strauss was also critical of Maimonides’s scholarly defenders like Cohen, who offered a “glamorized and retouched portrait” of the Rambam “as advocate for modern autonomous morality *avant la lettre*.” This critique extended to other prominent scholars like Julius Guttmann, who distorted Maimonides’s teaching by situating it in the “entirely unmedieval” context of “philosophy of religion,” thereby “miss[ing] the priority of the political” in Rambam’s approach, learned from Farabi, which he used “to warrant the life of freely thinking in a revelation-governed era” (105–6).

By contrast, while denying that Spinoza’s philosophy constituted an “advance” over Maimonides’s teaching, “Strauss recognized in Spinoza,” G. maintains, “a version of basic Maimonideanism cleverly adapted . . . to the changed conditions of modern life.” G. judged that Strauss “was not compelled to abandon Spinoza’s modern practical teaching [which provides much of the underpinning of liberal democracy] in the process of his rediscovering Maimonides’ greater theoretical profundity” (129–30).

Indeed, Strauss determined that precisely “the effort to save” Spinoza’s own “project,” which aimed at the noble goal of “the production of free minds in a decent society,” now “required an unprejudiced study” of its Maimonidean foundations in their original form (126, 151). Far from being an opponent of liberal democracy, as some recent critics have unfairly charged, Strauss “defends and tentatively ‘returns’ to the ancients and medievals” because the “defense of reason” that liberal democracy requires “cannot be achieved entirely on modern grounds,” given Heidegger’s deconstruction of naïve rationalism on the basis of radical historicism (155–56).

Paradoxically, G. concludes, Strauss’s study of Maimonides led him to conclude “that reason needs revelation precisely in order to remain reasonable,” and that accepting revelation “as its leading challenger (in the form of prophetically revealed scripture) is a better way for reason to deal with its perennial challengers than the forms of

modern ‘irrationalism’ (often themselves devised by philosophers) are able to provide,” although “the relation between reason and revelation must be ‘determined,’” as Maimonides believed, “by the priority of the political even in philosophical debate” (158–59).

In G.’s account, Strauss himself, after boldly challenging the traditional or conventionally pious understanding of Maimonides’s views in his pathbreaking 1936 essay “Some Remarks on the Political Science of Maimonides and Farabi,” chose henceforth to imitate the Rambam’s politic tact by presenting his thought “in a less imprudent and more responsible way” (*Leo Strauss on Maimonides* 38). G.’s own interpretation of Strauss’s thought does not make for easy reading, perhaps because he imitates his subject’s tact. But in these two volumes, he has provided the patient and philosophic reader with an invaluable compendium of writings by a thinker who deserves to be recognized as a latter-day Maimonides, together with an admirably thoughtful *entrée* into the study of those writings.

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*The Severity of God: Religion and Philosophy Reconceived.* By Paul K. Moser. New York: Cambridge University, 2013. Pp. xi + 218. \$29.99.

An alternative title for this book could be “The Notion of a God Worthy of Worship.” This is the central idea from which all the main arguments flow, including some arguments that present severity as an important though widely neglected attribute of such a God. Moser’s purpose in foregrounding this aspect is to resist the popularized image of a warm and cuddly “celestial Santa Claus figure” (38). As a better candidate for the title of “God,” he proposes a morally perfect agent who seeks to share this moral perfection with human beings through a gracious process of redemption that demands (but does not coerce) their volitional cooperation even in the midst of suffering (6). M. appeals to Jesus’ Gethsemane experience (“not what I will, but what you will”) as exemplary (30, 88; see Mk 14:36). He adds to this Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s famous description of the costly nature of discipleship (38), and St. Paul’s many references to soteriology and ethics. In fact, if one were to ask whose God M. deems most worthy of worship, it would undoubtedly be Paul’s. And the primary reason would not be severity per se but a perfect exercise of *agapē* that transcends but necessarily includes a strict righteousness (17).

That the arguments of this text proceed from a “notion” (52) of God seems to support the philosophical nature of the work. What we have, by and large, is the exposition of an idea (the idea of a God worthy of worship), which would remain intelligible even if it lacked an actual, existing referent (12). M.’s frequent use of the subjunctive mood reminds the reader of the hypothetical frame of the discussion. A typical sentence reads, “For the sake of redemption, *this God would* bring serious conflict” (16, emphasis added), instead of the more direct, “*God brings* serious conflict,” which one might expect from a work of unfettered theology.