

## *The Mysterious Mr. Strauss*

“Leo Strauss: The European” and “The Closing of the Straussian Mind” by Mark Lilla, in *The New York Review of Books* (Oct. 21 & Nov. 4, 2004), 1755 Broadway, 5th fl., New York, N.Y. 10019-3780.

Thirty years after his death, Leo Strauss (1899–1973), a German-born émigré scholar, began popping up in various political journals as the satanic thinker behind the allegedly duplicitous neocon march to war in Iraq. The charge was baseless, argues Lilla, a professor at the University of Chicago’s Committee on Social Thought. For Strauss, if not for many of his American followers, ideological partisanship was a temptation philosophers should avoid.

Politics offered no solution to what Strauss regarded as the philosopher’s basic dilemma: how to live a life of perpetual questioning when most people and societies *need* the settled answers provided by political and religious authority. Strauss found a solution to the dilemma in the “esotericism” practiced by Alfarabi, the founder of medieval Islamic philosophy, and Maimonides, his medieval Jewish counterpart. “The conventional view,” writes Lilla, “is that both tried to reconcile classical philosophy with revealed law and thereby reform their societies. When Strauss discovered Alfarabi, he became convinced that this was just his exoteric, publicly accessible doctrine, and that, if his works are read more attentively, a subtler, esoteric teaching emerges.” In short, Alfarabi’s writings gave casual readers the impression that philosophy and revelation are compatible, while attentive readers perceived that they are not.

Moving further back in time, says Lilla, Strauss developed “an idealized picture of an

‘ancient’ or ‘classical’ philosophical tradition that was also esoteric.” He then tried to show that modern Enlightenment philosophy had domesticated “the truly radical nature of Socratic questioning,” and that “the genuine freedom of philosophy as a way of life” had been lost.

Strauss was a teacher as well as a thinker, and, as a professor in the United States in the second half of his life, he acquired a considerable following in American universities. In some places, Straussians’ “habit of forming dogmatic cliques with students and hiring one another” won them an unenviable reputation. Since Strauss’s death, younger Straussians “have turned their attention increasingly to Washington” and slowly adapted Straussian doctrine “to comport with neoconservative Republicanism.” Many of them, such as Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul D. Wolfowitz, have served in high government positions, while others, such as William Kristol, editor of *The Weekly Standard*, “play central roles in the neoconservative intellectual-political-media-foundation complex.”

Most of the charges made about a malign Straussian influence in the government “are patently absurd,” Lilla says. But some political Straussians are guilty of narrowing Strauss’s thought into hardened dogmas. “It is a shame that Strauss’s rich intellectual legacy is being squandered through the shortsightedness, provincialism, and ambition of some of his self-proclaimed disciples.”

## *Fallen Evangelicals*

“The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience” by Ronald J. Sider, in *Books & Culture* (Jan.–Feb. 2005), 465 Gundersen Dr., Carol Stream, Ill. 60188.

It’s taken for granted in secular America that evangelical Christians are different in every way. The dismaying evidence from national polls is that they aren’t. “Whether the issue is divorce, materialism, sexual promiscuity, racism, physical abuse in marriage, or neglect of a biblical worldview, the polling

data point to widespread, blatant disobedience of clear biblical moral demands on the part of people who allegedly are evangelical, born-again Christians,” writes Sider, a professor of theology, holistic ministry, and public policy at Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary, near Philadelphia.

## Periodicals

A 2001 Barna Group survey found that the divorce rate among born-again Christians was 33 percent, about the same as the rate for the population as a whole. Twenty-five percent of the born-again Christians surveyed had lived with a member of the opposite sex outside marriage, not much different from the national average of 33 percent. And a recent study of 12,000 evangelical teenagers who took the “True Love Waits” pledge to postpone intercourse until marriage found that only 12 percent kept the promise. Indeed, a quarter of the most committed, “traditional” evangelicals and nearly half of “nontraditional” evangelicals tell pollsters they find premarital sex morally acceptable.

The biblical injunction to help the poor likewise gets short shrift from many evangelicals. They gave six percent of their income to charity in 1968 and, after decades of

growing affluence, only four percent in 2001. That’s better than the three percent given by mainline Protestants, but still much less than the biblical tithe of 10 percent.

Yet there’s evidence that religious commitment does lead to better behavior—though Sider laments that so many Christians still fall short. For example, the relatively few born-again Christians who strongly adhere to a biblical worldview are indeed “different”: Half of them did more than an hour of volunteer work for an organization serving the poor in the week before one recent poll, compared with only 22 percent of other Christians. “When we can distinguish nominal Christians from deeply committed, theologically orthodox Christians,” says Sider, “it is clear that genuine Christianity does lead to better behavior, at least in some areas.”

## *The Vatican’s Lost Monopoly*

“The Economics of the Counter-Reformation: Incumbent-Firm Reaction to Market Entry” by Robert B. Ekelund, Jr., Robert F. Hebert, and Robert D. Tollison, in *Economic Inquiry* (Oct. 2004), Texas A&M Univ., Dept. of Economics, College Station, Texas 77843-4228.

When the Protestant Reformation began in the 16th century, it was as if a new business firm were seeking to gain a share of the religious market from an established monopoly. And in the Counter-Reformation, the Catholic Church responded just as monopolistic firms typically do—with a corporate reorganization plan. But the plan failed.

It’s enlightening to subject the whole episode to a business analysis, say economists Ekelund and Hebert, both of Auburn University, and Tollison, of Clemson University. The medieval Catholic Church had evolved from a vertically integrated firm into a powerful monopoly that sought returns from its properties and “sold assurances of eternal salvation and other religious services.” The church created and manipulated doctrine to increase revenues (virtually inventing purgatory, for instance, along with a system of indulgences whereby payments and other sacrifices could cut the time one posthumously had to serve in it). By the 16th century, the church had “sheared too much wool from the sheep.” Its doctrinal manipulations, complex reward and

punishment schemes, and monopoly price discrimination combined to push certain consumers to the limits of their demands for the Church’s product.” Hence the market opening for Protestantism, which made “‘all-or-none’ offers, using an uncomplicated pricing scheme.”

At the Council of Trent (1545–63), the church responded to the Reformation with public efforts “to lower the price (or increase the quality) of its services.” Among the proclaimed reforms: It limited the number of benefices (revenue-producing assets) each bishop could hold; established minimum competency requirements for the clergy; set penalties for concubinage and other abuses; prohibited bishops from selling rights and offices; eliminated charges for providing certain services; and “tried to institute quality control over the doctrine of Purgatory and the veneration of sacred relics, and to abolish ‘all evil traffic’ in indulgences.”

Such measures “permitted at least the advertised cleaning up of abuses at the retail level of Church organization,” actions that ap-