

Courses Taught

POLI 201 Western Political Heritage, Part 1

- What is “politics”? Today the word immediately suggests competition for elective office, and the organizing of material interests or the mobilization of words and images associated with such competition – “spin” and “spin-control,” back-room bargaining and grass-roots organization. More abstractly, we think that politics has to do with the pursuit and the organization of “power,” especially the power of the state – that is, ultimately, the power to inflict death. “Politics” thus seems to be about vain competition and about power – not very edifying themes. Those of us not inclined to get involved in such competition for political office may well disdain the activity we call politics, considering it hardly more dignified or significant than the scrambling of adolescents to be class president or prom queen. Or, even if we recognize the inescapable significance of the stakes of political contests, we may regard politics as a purely external necessity, a set of concerns that must be attended to in order to protect our interests and, ultimately, our lives. We might admit politics so understood to be part of our fallen nature, but we are unlikely to consider the subject essential to the education of our souls.

POLI 202 Western Political Heritage, Part 2

- This class aims to expose students to both the power and limitations of the intellectual and spiritual traditions that constitute the modern part of our Western heritage. One of the central purposes of this aim is to help students think and communicate in more profound and penetrating ways about fundamental moral and political questions (who should rule? to what end? what is the best institutional form of government? what sort of rule is needed to live the best way of life? what is the best way of life, what is possible in politics given the nature of things? what public obligations do we owe one another? etc.). And these questions inevitably invite even deeper questions about the nature of truth and how we gain knowledge of what is right and good in our practical lives. To equip students to wrestle with all such questions, which typically defy tidy and universally accepted answers, we will read carefully and discuss in detail a number of texts from some of the greatest minds of Europe and America from 1500 AD forward.

POLI 362 Reason, Revelation, and Politics

- Political life is bound up with human choice and responsibility, and thus with forethought and discussion, that is, with the claims of reason. But reason is necessarily limited in its access to ends as well as to means, and so an appeal to some authority beyond reason seems also to be inherent in politics and indeed in human existence more generally. Our (“Western”) civilization has been shaped by the confluence of the authority of Greek philosophy on one the hand and of that of the Bible on the other, as well as by the tension between these two authorities. Not long ago, many hoped, and others feared, that this confluence and this tension were about to be definitively overcome by the full ascendancy of a secular, rationalistic order. But this hope has waned, under the pressure

of events and, no doubt, due to its own internal incoherence. For do we even know what “secular” means? Or can reason by itself frame the meaning of life for an individual or for a community? And yet no common religion seems to be available as a source of public authority. How, then, can we – as individuals, as religious believers, and as members of a political community – find our way in this era that, it seems, can be neither confidently rational and secular nor publicly religious? How might we faithfully and reasonably address the claims of reason and of revelation in such times?

POLI 367 Contemporary Political Theory

- The term "contemporary political theory" covers wide a variety of disparate projects and conversations; there is no point in attempting a comprehensive survey in a single semester. This course is framed by the concerns articulated in Daniel Mahoney's new *The Idol of Our Age: How the Religion of Humanity Subverts Christianity*. Against this background we seek to uncover the most fundamental questions underlying contemporary political debates and to examine in some depth the most powerful sources of contemporary liberal (Alexandre Kojève, John Rawls) and conservative (Leo Strauss) political argument. Next it surveys broadly "postmodernist" thought on the European continent, including an influential and symptomatic argument (Alain Badiou's) linking Paul's Good News to contemporary revolutionary hopes. Then, coming down to the level of immediate political debate, we consider the appeal and the problematic status of "identity politics." Finally we examine the thought of one who has been called the greatest living political philosopher, Pierre Manent, retired professor in Paris.

POLI 462 Tocqueville

- Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* has been justly described as at once the best book ever written about democracy, and the best book ever written about America. Tocqueville is able to achieve such great insight on both these subjects because his treatment of them is grounded in a deeper reflection on essential questions of human existence: Can reason and natural virtue guide human beings as individuals and communities, or do we necessarily depend upon religious teachings beyond our comprehension? What are the sources of the modern commitment to equality, and where does this commitment lead? What is human greatness, and can a space for greatness be preserved within the democratic movement? This class will explore Tocqueville's political teaching in connection with such central philosophical and religious questions.