

RELIGION 440 – MODERN RELIGIOUS THOUGHT

FALL 2009

THURSDAYS
3:30 P.M. TO 6:15 P.M.
504HL

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Professor

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COURSE DESCRIPTION

This is an undergraduate seminar with changing topics. In this outing of the course, we will explore the way in which a select group of modern thinkers considered the meaning – and the limits – of human autonomy in religious and moral terms. Issues of alienation, anomie, and social and personal fragmentation will accompany this study of modern selfhood, particularly as we focus on the social, cultural, and political life in late 18th-, 19th-, and early 20th-century Europe and the United States. So too will questions about evil, suffering, despair, and hope.

In order to conduct our study of modern selfhood in religious and moral terms, we will employ the literary productions of a broad array of cultural figures – from late 18th- and early 19th-century philosophers, writers, and religious thinkers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Mary Shelley, and Søren Kierkegaard, to late 19th- and early 20th-century writers, playwrights, and anthropologists such as Anton Chekhov, Isak Dinesen, and Zora Neale Hurston. We will find that all of these people provide us with an opportunity to think about human being in broadly religious terms, even though some of them are not religious figures at all.

REQUIRED COURSE TEXTS

James C. Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought: The Enlightenment and the Nineteenth Century*, second edition (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2006).

Nicholas Roe, ed., *An Oxford Guide to Romanticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

Isaac Kramnick, ed., *The Portable Enlightenment Reader* (New York: Penguin Books USA, Inc., 1995).

Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (New York: Penguin, 2003).

Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, trans. Alastair Hannay (London: Penguin, 1992).

_____, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Alastair Hannay (London: Penguin, 1985).

Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Random House, 2004).

Anton Chekhov, *The Essential Plays*, trans. Michael Henry Heim (Modern Library, 2003)

_____, *Anton Chekhov's Short Stories*, ed. Ralph E. Matlaw (W. W. Norton, 1979).

Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (New York: Harper, 2006).

HIGHLY RECOMMENDED TEXT

Cornel West, *The Cornel West Reader* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, Perseus Books Group, 1999). West's work will help us to contextualize the African-American literature used in the course, and to relate this material to the other readings in the course.

OTHER REQUIRED READINGS ON RESERVE

Other required readings listed on the schedule below will be posted on Blackboard. Students should make their own copies of these readings and bring them to class with them.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS AND GRADING

In addition to the **weekly reading assignments**, students will be required to: 1) **participate in class through informal discussion and short writing assignments**, and 2) **a final essay**.

Class participation, comprised of reading assignments, informal class discussion, and short, weekly writing assignments, **will account for one half of a student's grade**. A student's *regular participation in class discussion* will be noted over the course of the semester. A letter grade will be assessed for it based upon the quality of a student's verbal participation—insightfulness, preparedness, and clarity. The fundamental part of a student's class participation grade, though, will be constituted of *short, weekly, writing assignments*. These writing assignments will serve as the basis of class discussion. Students will pick passages from the readings that they find interesting, and write at least one page of commentary on their chosen passage. In doing so, students should identify and analyze an issue in their chosen passage, and be ready to discuss it in class. To facilitate this, students should type their papers, putting the quoted passage at the top of the page, providing a citation for it, and then providing at least one page of double-spaced commentary. Students should write no more than three pages of commentary. They should also be prepared to turn in their papers at the end of each class session. **These short writing assignments will not be graded individually,**

but collectively at mid-term and at the end of the course, so that students will know how they are doing and have done in class when they do their final essay. Both the mid-term and final set of short papers will be worth up to 100 points per set. *The final class participation grade* will be an average of the two sets of short papers—increased, balanced, or lowered by my assessment of a student’s participation in class discussion. In other words, the average of writing assignments will be reduced by the assessment of a student’s verbal contributions to class discussion only if s/he **never** contributes anything to class discussion. Students should be prepared to meet with me at the end of the semester to discuss their final paper.

Please note that **failure to attend the course regularly and timely can also hurt a student’s class participation grade. Therefore, MAKE SURE THAT YOU ATTEND REGULARLY AND TIMELY.** Irregular attendance, including regular tardiness, will diminish your overall class participation grade in the following manner:

- One absence = No deductions.
- Two to Three absences = 5 points each.
- Each absence thereafter = 10 points per instance.
- Regular tardiness = 10 points per instance.

These penalties will be enforced. However, if you are having problems or have special issues, do not hesitate to inform me immediately.

The final essay will account for the second half of a student’s grade. Students will be asked to pick one or more works from the assigned texts on which to focus their final paper. The work(s) chosen may be one or more readings covered in class. Or the chosen work(s) may be one or more readings not covered in class, yet part of an anthology used in class (such as the Chekhov anthology). This essay should follow a standard paper style, preferably University of Chicago (see Turabian’s style manual). Students should make sure to proof their papers for errors in grammar and spelling, as well as for clarity and consistency of argument. Students should cite all sources that they use. This essay will be worth up to 100 points.

Grade Scale

| | | |
|----|---|--------|
| A | = | 95-100 |
| A- | = | 90-94 |
| B+ | = | 87-89 |
| B | = | 84-86 |
| B- | = | 80-83 |
| C+ | = | 77-79 |
| C | = | 74-76 |
| C- | = | 70-73 |
| D | = | 60-69 |
| F | = | 0-59 |

Fractions of points will be rounded to the nearest whole point *only at my discretion, and only in regard to the final grade.*

Expectations

Attendance : Students are expected to attend each class session regularly and timely. **STUDENTS ARE NOT FULLY PRESENT UNLESS THEY BRING ALL REQUIRED READING MATERIAL FOR THE DAY TO CLASS, ALONG WITH ANY ASSIGNED WRITING.**

Preparation : Students are expected to be prepared for each class and to submit all assignments when due. **TARDY WORK WILL NOT BE ACCEPTED. STUDENTS SHOULD ALSO BRING ALL REQUIRED READING MATERIAL FOR THE DAY TO CLASS AS WELL. ONE IS NOT FULLY PREPARED WITHOUT THESE MATERIALS.**

Respect: Students are expected to be attentive and courteous to me and each other. This means *no talking while others are talking; no entering and exiting while class is in session* (unless there is an emergency or this is part of the structure of a presentation); *no cell-phone calls; no text messaging or sending or writing e-mails; no reading newspapers during class*; no chewing gum or eating; no putting on makeup or combing one's hair; and so forth.

Problems : If you have problems with the assignments or anything else that might affect your performance, please contact me immediately. Email is best, but also call the main office of the Dept. of Religion and leave a message with one of the secretaries.

Plagiarism: Avoid the hint of plagiarism. If you use someone else's ideas or words, including in a paraphrase, cite the source and put the words that you use in quotation marks.

TENTATIVE SCHEDULE OF LECTURES, ASSIGNMENTS, & FILMS

| <u>Week</u> | <u>Date</u> | <u>Topic</u> |
|--------------------|--------------------|--|
| 1. | Thurs., 9/3 | Introduction. |
| 2. | Thurs., 9/10 | Enlightenment, Autonomy, and Religion: Kant and Rousseau. |

Assignment: Read Kant's "What is Enlightenment?" in Kramnick, and Rousseau's "Creed of the Savoyard Priest." Focus on the Rousseau piece,

choosing a passage for discussion, and jotting down some of the key issues that you find. Consider it also in the context of the Kant piece. You do not need to write a paper this week. For context, though, please do read Livingston, 1-11, 40-45, 49-69.

3. Thurs., 9/17 **Assignment:** Read the selections from Kant's "On the Miscarriage of All Philosophical Trials in Theodicy," *Lectures on Philosophical Theology*, and *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* on Blackboard. Identify passages and issues for discussion. You do not need to write a paper this week. Review Livingston as needed.

4. Thurs., 9/24 **Romanticism and Religion: Shelley and Kierkegaard.**

Assignment: This will be your first writing assignment. Read and write a paper on Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Since I will introduce Romanticism as a movement today, please also begin reading in the Roe anthology. Start with Part I. Also, please peruse the "Gender and Race" section in the *Enlightenment Reader*. Your focus, though, is Shelley's story.

5. Thurs., 10/1 **Assignment:** Today, we will begin our discussion of Kierkegaard. Please begin reading the "Seducer's Diary" in *Either/Or*. Read it with the "Diapsalmata" and the "Rotation of Crops." Identify several passages and issues that you may use in discussion today and for the paper that you will present in the next class session. Today's class session will be entirely introductory, so no paper is due. Do, however, read Livingston, 384-397, and Roe, as needed. You might also find it helpful to read Livingston, 116-127 (on Hegel), 214-229 (on Strauss and Feuerbach).

6. Thurs., 10/8 **Assignment:** Finish reading the "Seducer's Diary" and write a paper on it for class discussion. Begin reading and identifying passages and issues in the letters of Judge Wilhelm also in *Either/Or*.

7. Thurs., 10/15 **Assignment:** Finish reading the letters of Judge Wilhelm and write a paper on it for class discussion. Please also read the selections by Mary Astell and Catherine S. M. Graham in the "Gender and Race" section of the *Enlightenment Reader*. Please bring this reader to class with *Either/Or*, since we will be referring to it.

8. Thurs., 10/22 **Assignment:** Please read the sermon at the end of *Either/Or for the first half of class discussion*. Try to identify the central point of this sermon, particularly in light of Judge Wilhelm and the aesthete. *For the second half of class*, we will have a guest professor, Dr. Edward Mooney. He will

lead us in a discussion of Fear and Trembling, and will supply the portions of the text that he wishes for you to read and to prepare questions or a paper on ahead of time.

Slavery, Despair, and Religion: Black Anomie, Black Hope.

9. Thurs., 10/29 **Assignment:** Today, we will move to the American context and African-American experience during slavery. Please begin reading Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, identifying passages and issues for discussion and for the paper that you will present in the next class session. Note with your reading of it Solomon Northrup's narrative online via Bird Library's catalog and with selections of Frances E. W. Harper's poetry on Blackboard. For context, please read the introduction to the *Cornel West Reader* and the section on race in the *Enlightenment Reader*. Please bring the *Enlightenment Reader* to class along with Morrison's novel.
10. Thurs., 11/5 **Assignment:** Finish reading *Beloved* and prepare a paper on it for class discussion. Also read "Black Strivings in a Twilight Civilization" from the *Future of the Race* in the *Cornel West Reader*.

Turn-to-the-20th-Century Selfhood, Anomie and Religion: Chekhov, Hurston, and Dinesen.

11. Thurs., 11/12 **Assignment:** Chekhov's Short Stories. These will be assigned individually. Students are to write a paper on a cluster of stories assigned to them for class discussion. You may find West's discussions of Chekhov helpful. To this end, I will suggest some selections in the *Cornel West Reader*.
12. Thurs., 11/19 **Assignment:** Chekhov's Plays. Each student will take a play to write a paper on and to discuss in class.
13. Thurs., 11/26 **NO CLASS: THANKSGIVING BREAK.** Start reading and preparing your paper on Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.
14. Thurs., 12/3 **Assignment:** Write a paper on Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.
15. Thurs., 12/10 **LAST DAY OF CLASS:** Read and write an essay on Dinesen's "Babette's Feast." We may also screen the film and discuss it.
16. Thurs., 12/17 **FINAL ESSAYS DUE AT 4:00 PM IN DEPARTMENT OF RELIGION OFFICE. NO LATE PAPERS WILL BE ACCEPTED.**