

Religion and Its Critics

REL 108 | Fall 2016

Who is teaching our course?

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What is our course about?

Modernity began with religion. One of modernity's beginnings happened in Germany in 1517 with Martin Luther's 95 Theses. They proclaimed, among other things, a humanistic turn that defined Modernity. This turn led Modernity, ultimately, to turn on religion. Three centuries after Luther, three other Germanic thinkers—Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Sigmund Freud—realized this turn by dealing religion three body blows. Marx called religion the opium of the people. Nietzsche proclaimed the death of God. Freud diagnosed religion as an obsessional neurosis. Our course examines these critical body blows and their effects on religion and culture. It attends to these ongoing effects by investigating contemporary relations of religion, critique, and media. And it attends to that question at the heart of humanistic inquiry: what does it mean to be human?

What do we hope to gain from our course?

Our course materials, discussions, and activities work together in the service of our course's learning objectives:

- (1) to understand better how religion works, what religion does, and why religion matters in individual and collective, past and present contexts;
- (2) to appreciate and articulate multifaceted critiques of religion as a cultural phenomenon in relation to other, imbricated cultural phenomena;
- (3) to recognize the cultural effects and significances of religion's critics and critiques;
- (4) to identify ways in which contemporary cultural media offer critiques of religious ideas, structures, and practices;
- (5) to develop critical and self-critical habits of reading, thinking, and writing;
- (6) to ensure that these habits reflect on the humanities' relevance to contemporary ethical and social issues.

What skills will we develop?

Critical reading, thinking, and writing skills are probably the most important and most applicable skills you can learn in college. Because they are skills, they are learnable. But like any skill, they require practice. They can be learned, and ultimately mastered, if you are willing to devote time and effort to practicing them. Think of these critical skills as investments that require large initial deposits but that provide substantial returns with interest on those deposits.

What will we read?

Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* (9780393008319)

Karl Marx, *Selected Writings* (9780872202184)

Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality* (9780872202832)

Peter Shaffer, *Equus* (9780743287302)

Peter Singer, *Marx: A Very Short Introduction* (9780192854056)

Anthony Storr, *Freud: A Very Short Introduction* (9780192854551)

Michael Tanner, *Nietzsche: A Very Short Introduction* (9780192854148)

The last three texts are optional. Additional texts are available on Blackboard. Be sure to bring to class the text(s) we are discussing that day.

How is our course organized?

At heart, our course is a series of conversations: among our course materials and among ourselves. Our class meetings stage these conversations as live opportunities for interactive learning, with as many conversation partners as possible. Our course is *ours*, not only mine or yours. It is our responsibility to engage in these ongoing conversations with the materials and one another.

How will we orient ourselves?

In our course, we take the following statements as among our guiding principles.

- (1) None of us knows everything.
- (2) Each of us is here primarily to learn.
- (3) Each of us can contribute to our learning—our own and others'.
- (4) Learning requires differences. Differences are how we learn.
- (5) Questions are usually more illuminating, and more interesting, than answers.
- (6) Answers are primarily ways of asking better next questions.

What kind of community will we foster?

A class is a community, in which any member's actions affect other members. As members of this community, we share responsibility for making our community the best it can be. To do so, we commit to the following communal responsibilities.

Punctual attendance

We will be on time for and attend every class meeting from beginning to end. Attendance is a crucial component of learning, since it gives us opportunities to interact with course materials and with one another. Each absence after the second will lower your course grade by 20 points. Absences may be excused in documented cases of religious observance or university affairs, so long as you notify us officially in writing by 9 September 2016. Absences may also be excused in documented cases of critical and unforeseeable emergency.

Shared respect

We will be respectful and responsible—particularly in this course, whose charged materials require sensitivity. Being respectful and responsible includes preparing for and attending class from beginning to end, listening to others, appreciating differences, using inclusive language, refraining from eating and using electronic devices, and abstaining from any activity not productively contributing to our course. Anyone who does not act respectfully and responsibly may be excused from class for the day.

Academic integrity

We will uphold academic integrity. Because academic integrity forms the foundation of a learning community, it is absolutely imperative that we be honest and honorable members of this community. Cheating, in any form and to any degree, is an affront to this community that will not be tolerated. Cheating includes giving or receiving aid when prohibited, plagiarism, fraud, falsification, collusion, or any related act of deception or dishonesty. Anyone who commits such an act will be reported to the Office of Academic Integrity. The presumptive penalty for a first instance of academic dishonesty is course failure, accompanied by a transcript notation indicating that the failure resulted from a violation of academic integrity. For more information, see the Academic Integrity Policies and Procedures (<http://academicintegrity.syr.edu>).

Staying enrolled in this course will indicate your understanding of and agreement to its approaches, goals, principles, policies, responsibilities, and requirements.

What will we do to help ourselves learn and to demonstrate our learning?

We will engage in the following activities that give you opportunities to deepen and to assess your learning.

Participation

Participation depends on preparation. Before class, spend time carefully reading each text, marking important passages, jotting down questions, and engaging the text and its author as conversation partners. Then in class, comment on the passages you marked, ask the questions you jotted down (and others that arise), and engage other class members as conversation partners. Simply showing up is

not enough. Come to class ready to interact with texts and with one another in a dynamic, cooperative learning environment of inquiry and exploration. Then extend our discussion beyond the classroom—onto Twitter, for example, using the course hashtag, #religionanditscritics. You will earn points based on the quality, not the quantity, of your participation in and contributions to our learning.

Dialogue log

The dialogue log realizes your engagements with authors as conversation partners. It allows you to converse imaginatively with them: to pose questions, to extend or apply their arguments, to clarify details of their texts, etc. For each dialogue log entry, you will post in your Blackboard journal an imagined dialogue (300–400 words) between you and the author whose writings we are reading that week. It should integrate course readings and discussions in creative, perceptive ways. It should demonstrate your learning, ending in a different conceptual place from where it began. Your dialogue should be respectful and serious, but it need not be reverent and dour. This activity is an imaginative one, so be imaginative. The dialogue log is 1 learning activity, in 3 parts. To earn points for this learning activity, you must submit 2 of the 3 dialogue log entries.

Learning ledger

The learning ledger presents you with 5 specific occasions to think and write critically about your learning at different moments in our course. It allows you to think, to think about your thinking, and to write about both in relation to our course texts and topics. In doing so, the learning ledger links course content, critical skills, and learning observations. For each learning ledger entry, you will post in your Blackboard journal a response (300–400 words) to a particular, proposed prompt. Each learning ledger entry should respond thoroughly to the prompt, support its claims and conclusions, integrate course readings and discussions, and show thoughtfulness, reflection, and insight. The learning ledger is 1 learning activity, in 5 parts. To earn points for this learning activity, you must submit 4 of the 5 learning ledger entries.

Learning self-assessment

The learning self-assessment offers an opportunity to reflect on your learning in our course: what and how you have learned and how you have taken responsibility for your learning. For your learning self-assessment, you will post in your Blackboard journal a report (600–800 words) recounting and evaluating your learning—and your role in it—in our course. Use our course's learning goals to assess your learning performance. Be sure to mention specific skills and knowledges in relation to specific course goals, materials, and activities. Your self-assessment should include the number of points (out of 60) that you judge best represents your learning performance in our course.

Reflective responses

The 3 reflective responses are occasions to practice and improve your critical reading, thinking, and writing abilities. They draw together your learning and your skills of interpretation, comparison, application, and evaluation. Reflective responses are opportunities to use materials that our course considers. Each reflective response will be in response to 1 from among 2–3 pre-determined prompts. It should respond thoroughly to the prompt, support its claims and conclusions, integrate course readings and discussions, and show thoughtfulness, reflection, and insight.

Media project

The media project uses our course materials and discussions to do critical work on media that permeate our world. Working with a partner, you will select a piece of contemporary media—a video, a song, an advertisement, etc.—and develop a critique of it vis-à-vis religion. Your piece of media might enact a critique of religion. Or you might discover ways in which religion and critique interact in your piece of media. Then in class, you and your partner will present, in 8 minutes, your piece of media and your critique of it. You will also post in your Blackboard journal a co-written analysis (800–1000 words) articulating your critique and what it teaches us about religion and critique in relation to media—and about media in relation to religion and critique.

Learning finale

The learning finale is the capstone of our course. It provides you with a significant opportunity to demonstrate, integrate, and use your cumulative learning from our readings, discussions, and investigations of religion and critiques of it. The learning finale may not be rescheduled.

How will our learning be assessed and evaluated?

Your assessed opportunities for learning and achievement (i.e., assignments) will constitute your course grade based on the following point values.

Participation	100
Dialogue log (3 entries)	60
Learning ledger (5 entries)	60
Learning self-assessment	60
Reflective response #1	80
Reflective response #2	80
Reflective response #3	80
Media project	100
Learning finale	<u>180</u>
	800 points

Participation and the learning finale are mandatory. You choose which other learning activities you will do. You may do as many or as few as you choose. We will calculate your course grade based on the points you earn, according to the following scale.

	B+ 581–593	C+ 515–527	D 396–461
A 607–800	B 541–580	C 475–514	
A- 594–606	B- 528–540	C- 462–474	F 0–396

Learning activities are due by 12:45 on the designated dates. Because you have choices about the learning activities you do, we will not accept a learning activity after its due date. Exceptions may be granted in cases of critical and unforeseeable emergency.

What if I have a question?

Office hours provide you with weekly opportunities to extend class discussions, ask questions, or seek assistance. We (our course's teaching team) strongly encourage you to take advantage of these opportunities, especially if you are having difficulties. You can drop by without an appointment. You can also email us anytime.

What if I need a learning accommodation?

If you think you might need accommodations for a learning disability, please contact the Office of Disability Studies (<http://disabilityservices.syr.edu>) to discuss your needs and the process for requesting accommodations. The Office of Disability Services is responsible for coordinating disability-related accommodations and will, as appropriate, issue accommodation authorization letters to students with documented disabilities. Since accommodations may require early planning and generally are not provided retroactively, contact the Office of Disability Services and discuss your situation with us as soon as possible.

What if I have a religious holiday?

Syracuse University protects our rights to observe our respective religious traditions' holy days. You may make up any required work missed due to a religious observance provided that you notify us through MySlice by 9 September 2016. For more information, see the Religious Observances Policy (http://supolicies.syr.edu/emp_ben/religious_observance.htm).

Any tips for success in our course?

- (1) Read our course texts thoroughly, closely, and carefully.
- (2) Read them again.
- (3) Ask questions.
- (4) Reread the texts.
- (5) Ask more questions.
- (6) Reread the texts again.

Any words of wisdom?

"Religion. Religion's at the bottom of all this!" (Peter Shaffer)

What will we do, and when?

29 August Introduction

31 August J.Z. Smith, "Religion, Religions, Religious" + "Map Is Not Territory"

Political critique

5 September Labor Day

7 September Karl Marx, "Toward a Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*"
Learning ledger entry #1 due

12 September G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, §§189–96
Karl Marx, "Toward a Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*"

14 September Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, preface + §1
Learning ledger entry #2 due

19 September Karl Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach" + *The German Ideology*, preface
Dialogue log entry #1 due

21 September Reflective response #1

Moral critique

26 September Media day #1 | Daniel Stout, *Media and Religion*, §§2+5

28 September Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, preface + treatise 1

3 October Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, treatise 2, §§1–11

5 October Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, treatise 2, §§12–25
Learning ledger entry #3 due

10 October Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, treatise 3, §§1–14
Dialogue log entry #2 due

12 October Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, treatise 3, §§15–28

17 October Reflective response #2

19 October Media day #2 | Daniel Stout, *Media and Religion*, §§7–8

Psychological critique

24 October Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, §§1–3

26 October Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, §§4–5

- 31 October Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, §§6–8
Learning ledger entry #4 due
- 2 November Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, §§9–10
Dialogue log entry #3 due
- 7 November Reflective response #3
- 9 November Media day #3 | Daniel Stout, *Media and Religion*, §9
Media project due

Social critique

- 14 November *Network*
- 16 November *Network*
- 21 November Thanksgiving break
- 23 November Thanksgiving break

Cultural critique

- 28 November Peter Shaffer, *Equus*
- 30 November Peter Shaffer, *Equus*
Learning ledger entry #5 due
- 5 December Peter Shaffer, *Equus*
- 7 December Conclusion
Learning self-assessment due
- 12 December Learning finale, 12:45–14:45