

Religion and Its Critics

REL 100 | Fall 2016

Who is teaching our course?

Professor William Robert

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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 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.