

RLST 494: SEMINAR: RETHINKING SECULARISM (Spring 2014)

W 3:10-6:00

Wilson 1-154

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COURSE DESCRIPTION

In recent years, the humanities and interpretive social sciences have witnessed a “post-secular” turn in which scholars from various disciplines have begun to reject the secularization thesis— that is, the idea that religion necessarily withers away once a society becomes “modern.” It is increasingly clear that this is not the case: religion may take on new forms in modern societies, but it does not go away. This advanced undergraduate seminar surveys the emerging field of critical secular studies, with particular attention to work done by historians and critical theorists (i.e. continental philosophers). Course readings will help us to develop a common vocabulary for rethinking secularism, so that we can better understand the historical emergence of our secular age and the persistence of religion within it. Students will then put this critical vocabulary to use in final research projects on topics of their choosing.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

- To develop an advanced analytic vocabulary for discussing how religion intersects with culture and politics
- To develop advanced writing and discussion skills appropriate to the level of a senior major
- To develop advanced research skills using methodologies drawn from one or more academic disciplines

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

- **20 % Participation and Assignments:** This is first and foremost a discussion-based seminar, and so regular, thoughtful, and informed participation will be a major requirement. In order to contribute successfully to our conversations, you will have to come to class prepared to discuss the assigned reading. This means not only having read material and read it well, but also having reflected on the material before coming to class. The quality and the quantity of your contributions will be noted and will determine your final participation grade. Miscellaneous course assignments will also factor into this component of your grade.
- **30 % Seminar Papers:** To facilitate course discussion, all students will write two seminar papers. On your assigned dates, you will email a short (1.5pp single spaced) paper about the reading to all class members 24 hours prior to our Wednesday meeting (i.e. by Tuesday at 3pm). In the paper, you are to propose one key term, concept, or method from the assigned reading for inclusion in our shared critical “toolbox.” A good seminar paper will offer a fair and accurate summary of the pertinent thinker’s argument or broader project, as well as the place of the chosen term within it. It will also offer some critical reflection on this term and its potential uses within our inquiry into the cultures of secularism. During the seminar meeting, the entire class will discuss the seminar paper and offer feedback on it. The seminar paper will then be revised and resubmitted as a polished 3-5 page essay that will be due the following Wednesday at the beginning of class.

- **20% Final Project Presentation:** All students will present their final research project during the closing weeks of class. Presentations will be evaluated for both style and content. Further instructions will follow on a handout.
- **30 % Final Research Paper:** A substantial final research paper on a topic of your choosing must demonstrate depth of research; competence in at least one disciplinary methodology; and engagement with core themes and terms of the seminar. Further instructions will follow on a handout.

COURSE POLICIES

- **Attendance:** Due to the dense and cumulative nature of our conversation, even a single absence will put you behind in the course. I understand that due to illness and other emergencies some students may need to miss one meeting. In order to accommodate such emergencies, each student will be permitted one discretionary absence. Missing more than one week, even for valid reasons, will be detrimental to your performance in the course. Consequently, each additional absence will reduce the final grade one third (A becomes A-, etc.). Chronic or extreme tardiness will be counted as absence.
- **Late Papers and Assignments:** All assignments should be turned in on time. If an assignment is turned in late, its final grade will be lowered by one letter per day. Thus, the highest possible grade for a paper turned in one day late would be a B. Papers turned in one minute after the deadline will be considered a full day late. Extensions will not be granted unless arrangements have been made at least one week in advance.
- **Academic Dishonesty:** Plagiarism and cheating will not be tolerated. All references to ideas from books, articles, or other sources must be cited correctly. If you do not know how to properly reference your work, or you are in doubt whether or not you should cite material, refer to the *Student Academic and Conduct Guidelines*, or make an appointment to see the instructor to discuss the problem. Any student caught cheating, plagiarizing, or otherwise engaged in academic dishonesty will fail the course and be reported to the Dean of Students.
- **Discussion Guidelines:** Religion is by nature a contentious subject matter, and thus promises to keep our conversations lively. Our task in this class will be to analyze religion as a cultural phenomenon, not to tout our own beliefs or disparage those of others. Critical thinking is a must, and it is likewise imperative that everyone approach religious texts and traditions with appropriate respect.
- **Support Services:** Montana State University provides a variety of services to ensure that you thrive, academically and otherwise. If you have a particular physical or learning disability that requires special accommodation, please contact both me *and* the Office of Disability, Re-Entry, and Veterans Services (180 Strand Union Building; x2824). Otherwise, if you think that a health problem, a family emergency, or some other life event will adversely affect your academic performance, you should contact the Dean of Students for support (174 Strand Union Building; x2826).
- **Writing Guidelines:** Good writing is revised writing. The best writers generate multiple drafts and enlist the help of readers in order to produce a smooth final product: you are no exception. A top-level paper will not only demonstrate technical mastery (i.e. it will be devoid of grammatical and stylistic errors); it will also possess a clear organizational scheme that bolsters its major argument. Top papers will advance a strong thesis statement and will support that statement with ample citations from appropriate primary and secondary sources.

REQUIRED TEXTS

Craig Calhoun, Mark Juergensmeyer, and Jonthan VanAntwerpen, *Rethinking Secularism*

Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*

Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology*

Giorgio Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory*

Bruno Latour, *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods*

Winifred Sullivan, *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom*

Tisa Wenger, *We Have a Religion*

N. B.: All required texts are available for purchase in the campus bookstore. On the schedule of readings, articles posted to electronic course reserves at the library website are indicated by (CR). Readings are to be completed *in advance* of the date on which they are listed.

WHAT IS SECULARISM?

- 1/8 Preliminaries
- 1/15 Calhoun et. al., *Rethinking Secularism*: Introduction, Taylor, Casanova
John Locke, "A Letter Concerning Toleration" (abridged) (CR)
- 1/22 Calhoun et. al., *Rethinking Secularism*: Calhoun, Bhargava, Asad, and two other essays of your choice
Bring to class: One cultural object to analyze

PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACHES

- 1/29 Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, Ch. 1-7
Bring to class: Three ideas for a final paper topic
- 2/5 Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, Ch. 8-14
Bring to class: Three more ideas for a final paper topic
- 2/12 Schmitt, *Political Theology*
- 2/19 Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory*, Chs. 1-4
- 2/26 Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory*, Chs. 5-7
- 3/5 Latour, *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods*
- 3/12 NO CLASS: SPRING BREAK

HISTORICAL APPROACHES

- 3/19 Sullivan, *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom*, Intro and Chs. 1-5
Due: Research Paper Topic Proposal
- 3/16 Wenger, *We Have a Religion*, selections
Due: Research Paper Bibliography

OUR APPROACHES

- 4/2 Individual Meetings for Final Projects
Due: Research Paper Outline
- 4/9 Student Presentations
- 4/16 Student Presentations
- 4/23 Final Papers Due