

Critique of Religion

CASRN469/769

Spring 2006

Instructor

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Office hours: Wednesday 12-2 and by appt.

Course description

Philosophical critiques of revealed religion from Enlightenment to the 20th century, including analysis of criticisms in Antiquity and the Middle Ages. Major trends examined include rationalism, idealism, materialism, and nihilism.

Course books

Cicero, *De natura deorum* (Harvard U Press, 1940)

Spinoza, *A Theological-Political Treatise*, transl. Shirley (Hackett Publ., 2nd ed)

John Locke, *Reasonableness of Christianity* (OUP 2000)

John Toland, *Christianity not mysterious* (Liliput Press 1997)

Voltaire, *Philosophical Dictionary* (Penguin Classics edition)

Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, transl. A. Arkush (Univ. Press of New England 1983)

Kant, *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (Cambridge U Press 1998)

Feuerbach, *The Essence of Religion* (Prometheus Press 2004)

Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, transl. W. Kaufmann (intage 1989)

Freud, *Future of an Illusion* (Norton & Co., 1989)

Other readings will be made available on a courseinfo site or on reserve.

Assignments

a) Reading journal The study of complex philosophical texts requires active reading. To make sure you're on track with the readings, you will keep a reading journal. Your entries will be submitted via email to mzank@bu.edu. What I am looking for in your journal is as follows.

For every assigned reading, I expect you to summarize the argument in one or few paragraphs. In addition, note any questions that occur to you while reading and detail any arguments that are particularly important. Record any striking or illuminating passages verbatim, and note the page number. Add any comparative observations that help you to link the readings with one another. Don't eliminate from your journal things

that, after rethinking the material, turned out to be wrong or askew. The digital format allows you to comment on your own comments instead, indicating how your understanding developed over time.

b) Outlines You will be required to submit two outlines of texts we read in class. An outline should be helpful to others as well as yourself in understanding the main points of an argument and their connection with one another. Too much detail is unhelpful. The structure should be clear and representative of the main, pertinent points, moves, etc. An occasional verbatim quote may be helpful to represent the voice of the text authentically. It ought to be possible to give an oral presentation on the basis of an outline that an audience can follow with or without having read the text. We will make a schedule of outlines at the beginning of the semester.

c) Exams/Paper There will be two exams, in two parts. The first part, taken in class, will require you to identify passages. The second part is in a take-home format and will ask you to answer questions, rehearse arguments, or compare and contrast particular positions presented in the readings. The second exam may be substituted by a paper of your own design. If you choose to write a paper instead of the take-home part of the second exam (you still need to do the in-class part), you need to submit a topic with bibliography by week 12 and an outline by week 13. Should I find either of these preliminary submissions wanting you will be compelled to do the exam instead.

Grading

Journal entries will be graded on the basis of the quality and sophistication of the entries, not quantity. The journal constitutes 20% of the course grade. The two outlines of major texts read in class constitute 10% each. The exams and the optional paper will be 20% each. The remainder of the course grade (20%) will be determined by attendance, preparedness, and quality of participation.

General rules The BU Code of Academic Conduct applies. (See <http://www.cs.bu.edu/ugradprogram/conduct.html>).

Schedule of Topics and Readings

Week One (January 17 - 19)

I. Introduction to the Critique of Religion:

Definition of terms, history(s) of the problem(s), and limitation of the topic

Matthias Lutz-Bachmann, s.v. "Religion, Critique of" in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Religion* (on courseinfo as pdf file)

Week Two (January 24 – 26)

II. Ancient Philosophical Critiques of Pagan Religion:

Epicureans, Stoics, and Sceptics on the nature of the gods

Cicero, *De natura deorum*

Recommended: Diogenes Laertius, *De vitis et dogmatibus clarorum philosophorum*, Book X,
Lucretius, *De rerum natura*.

Week Three (January 31 – Febr 2)

III. Medieval Philosophical Critique of the Divine Law:

The Prophetology of Maimonides

Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed* (II:32-48) (courseinfo pdf), L. Strauss, *Philosophy and Law* (1935), Chapter 3: "The Philosophic Foundations of the Law: Maimonides's Doctrine of Prophecy and its Sources" (courseinfo pdf)

Week Four (Febr 7 -9)

IV. Modern Radicalization of the Medieval Critique of Divine Law:

Spinoza, the Freedom of Philosophy, and the State

B. Spinoza, *Tractatus theologico-politicus* (A Theologico Political Treatise), Preface and Chapters 1-7

Week Five (Febr 14 – 16)

(Topic IV. continued)

B. Spinoza, *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, Chapters 12-20

Weeks Six and Seven (Febr 21 – March 2)

Febr. 21 is BU Tuesday; Febr. 23 and 28: Prof. Zank will be absent. Classes will be held by TBA. Prof. Zank returns March 1st and will hold class as usual on March 2nd.

Febr. 23: Review and discussion of readings so far and exam prep.

Febr. 28: First exam (in-class part: ID of quotations)

March 2: Introduction to Part II of the Course

Reading: Matthias Lutz-Bachmann, "The Critique of Reason in Modern Philosophy and the Cognitive Status of Religion" in *American Catholic Philosophical Association Proceedings*, vol. 74 (2001), pp. 53-63 (courseinfo pdf)

SPRING BREAK March 4 – 12

Week Eight (March 14 - 16)

V. Socinianism, Deism, and the "Religion of Reason:"

Defending a rationally purified biblical religion against orthodoxy and against the critique of all historical-positive religions

J. Locke. *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, J. Toland, *Christianity not mysterious*

Week Nine (March 21 – 23)

VI. Radical and Moderate Enlightenment:

Radical atheism vs. religious and political reform

Voltaire, *Philosophical Dictionary*, M. Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem, or On religious power and Judaism*

Week Ten (March 28 – 30)

VII. Transcendental idealism and religion as morality:

The moral argument for belief

I. Kant, *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*

Week Eleven (April 4 - 6)

VIII. Spiritualism:

Absolute Idealism or: Religion as the truth in symbolic form

Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* (selections, on courseinfo or reserve)

Week Twelve (April 11 – 13)

IX. Materialism:

Materialist critique of Hegel's philosophy of religion

K. Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach*, and idem, *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law* (on reserve or courseinfo)

Week Thirteen (April 18 – 20)

X. Psychologism:

Anthropological materialism and religion as projection/sublimation

L. Feuerbach, *The Essence of Religion* S. Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*

Week Fourteen (April 25 – 27)

XI. Nietzsche:

Nihilistic critique of the moral defense of religion

Fr. Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*