

RELIGION AND SECULARISM

Kazan Cathedral, St. Petersburg, Russia



Course Description

According to many important twentieth-century social theorists, modernization of the world meant its secularization: as the world developed, it would also become much more secular: less dependent and less influenced by religious ideas. By the early twenty-first century, we know that this assumption has turned out to be inaccurate. This seminar in political theory explores the relationship between religion and secularism, focusing on the political significance of the relationship. It begins by exploring the development of religious diversity among (primarily Christian) religious positions in the West in the early modern period (from the Protestant reformation through the eighteenth-century). It moves to more contemporary themes, including the tension between religious identities and the modern state, the so-called God debate by prominent atheists, and other recent controversies about religious diversity (e.g., the Danish controversy over anti-Islamic cartoons). We will focus on the development of ideas (what does “toleration” mean?) and concepts (what is “secular”?). The readings will include historical and contemporary texts.

The gravitational center of this seminar is semi-unapologetically the Western world: Europe and North America. “Semi-unapologetically” means that there are reasons for the seminar’s West-centeredness, but that such reasons themselves are subject to critical analysis. In other words, much of the way we think about religious themes in the world today is shaped by the actual and conceptual Western imperialism over the centuries. Political theory remains to a large extent captive of such imperialist traditions; you are welcome to address this fact.

Learning Objectives

This seminar is an opportunity for every participant to focus on an important topic in our contemporary world. Its goal is to allow you to think through and work out questions about the very broad topics of the politics of religion and secularism. It is also an opportunity for you to practice your interpretive and expressive skills.

Instructor:
Prof. Mika LaVaque-Manty
7640 Haven Hall
mmanty@umich.edu
734.615.9142

Office hours:
Mondays, 1-2
Tuesdays, 2-3

Via CTools chat
Wednesdays, 2-3

...and by appointment

Important Dates

9/28: Drop/add deadline

9/28: Notification deadline for religious conflicts

10/2: Short paper due

12/18: Term paper due

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Rules of the Game for the Course

Given the demographics of the University of Michigan, it is very likely that the participants in this seminar reflect a wide variety of relationships to religion. There may be believers and practitioners of many different faiths as well as non-believers. People will have different degrees of faith and commitment to their beliefs, and there will be differences in their views on what it means to believe in or practice something. One implication of this fact is that religion is extremely personal for many people. All of these factors set challenges to how we engage the questions in this seminar.

Scholarly inquiry requires an open-minded willingness to bracket, at least to some extent, one's immediate and personal views. It does not require one to abandon or reject them. We will encounter — in our readings, perhaps in our conversations — views with which we thoroughly disagree and which may even upset us. We will discuss any controversial materials before reading them, but everyone in the seminar owes to him or herself and the other participants openness to *reasoned engagement with ideas* and *respect to others' right to their views and beliefs*. You don't have to respect someone's beliefs, but you must, in this seminar, respect that person and his or her right to have those beliefs. (Some of the texts we will read don't do this. We are not to take them as our model, but as our objects of inquiry.)

That said, this seminar is not primarily about our identities. Everyone is allowed to identify his or her religious or non-religious commitments, but nobody will be put on the spot as a representative of any view or asked to reveal his or her religious identity. So saying things like "Are there any Jews here?" or "What religion are you?" is off limits in this seminar. In short, you may self-identify if you want or think it relevant; nobody will make you do that.

And the more mundane rules of the game:

- This course will function like a graduate seminar: Learning is a collective endeavor where everyone's participation matters. You need to come to class **on time, prepared** and **ready to engage** the texts, your peers and the professor.
- Because the nature of the seminar, you should make every effort to attend regularly. Participation counts heavily. We only meet once a week, and missing even one session will be a problem. That said, the H1N1 flu and the university's recommendations for how to deal with present a complication. It is very likely that some of you will get the flu during the term. Please stay home until you have been fever-free for 24 hours. Let me know as soon as you can about your absence. You do not need a doctor's note. (But do remember that you can only get the flu once. Using it as an excuse more than once will prove you are a dishonest person.)
- The quality of your written work, not effort, is the sole criterion on which it is graded. Good work almost always requires effort, though, so do expect to work hard.

Students with Disabilities

If you would like to request academic accommodations due to a disability, please make an appointment to see Prof. LaVaque-Manty. If you haven't done so already, you are also encouraged to contact Services for Students with Disabilities (SSD), Rm. G-625 Haven Hall 1045, tel. 763-3000 (Voice/TTY/TDD).

Religious Observances

In keeping with the University of Michigan policy of respecting students' religious commitments, all attempts will be made to accommodate conflicts arising out of religious observances. Please note that, according to the Provost's policy on religious holidays, **you must give notice of a religious conflict by the drop/add deadline**. After that, requests cannot be honored.

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- Prior preparation, talents and abilities will affect your performance in this seminar. Your grades for prior work don't; a kind of paper that earned you an A in another course may earn you C. And vice versa.
- Any instance of academic misconduct will automatically result in your failing the seminar. It is **your** responsibility to avoid even the appearance of academic misconduct.

Assignments and Grading

Participation

Doing the readings and participating actively in the seminar discussions are very important. Because of the risk of flu, however, the concept of participation includes more than seminar attendance: you can make up for lost face time by participating in the seminar chat room (on CTools) or by going beyond the call of duty on the seminar blog.

This broader concept of participation accounts for **20% of your final course grade**. The criteria are as follows:

- **A:** Active, regular and constructive participation in all seminar discussions. Absences due to illness only, made up by constructive and thoughtful engagement through the chat and the blog.
- **B:** Regular attendance with enough participation that if we conduct a survey at the end of the term, your peers will remember who you are and some of the things that you said. Thoughtful engagement through the chat and the blog if you fall ill.
- **C:** Spotty attendance or your peers' failure to recognize your contributions to the course. Minimal or inadequate engagement during illness.

Oh, you don't want even to think about the below-C category.

Syllabus Design

You will participate in designing the last two weeks of the course readings. The theme will be the 2006 cartoon controversy over cartoons published by the *Jyllands-Posten*. It is the responsibility of the students — working either in groups or alone — to come up with a manageable set of the readings for the last two weeks. We will all talk about how we might go about this together. The grade for this component of the course will be based on your thoughtful engagement with the assignment, not by whether your reading gets selected. **The assignment will count for 5% of your final course grade.**

Writing

Writing in this seminar comes in two primary forms: conventional academic essays and a blog. You will write, early on, a very short conventional piece on a pre-assigned topic as well as a longer term paper on a more flexible topic at the end of

Possible Flu Outbreaks

If you get the flu and especially if you know or suspect it is of the H1N1 variety, please stay home and contact your GSI immediately via email. We will make alternative arrangements for you to participate in the discussion sections.

Incompletes

The university policy on the grade of "incomplete" will apply in this course. It is generally not in a student's interest to have an incomplete, so try to avoid getting one.

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the term. You will also contribute to the course blog, through substantive and substantial posts and by engaging your peers.

Short Paper

The short paper is 500 words, or about two double-spaced pages, and is due on October 2. You will submit it electronically through CTools. **The short paper is worth 10% of your course grade.**

Term Paper

The term paper should be about 2,000–2,500 words (12–14 double-spaced pages) long. It is due on December 18. The term paper requires a short abstract, due November 30, in which you specify your plans. The abstract is only for feedback; it is not graded. However, if you have not turned in one, you cannot get credit for the term paper. **The term paper is worth 30% of your course grade.**

Seminar Blog

There will be a blog associated with the seminar. What you write on it will be public, and remain so. You must write with your real name. You may write on anything that engages the seminar readings or themes. Your writings may be brief contributions that connect the themes with something you've discovered in the world; they may be thoughtful comments on your peers' posts, and they may be longer engagement with the course themes. Every seminar participant will have to write at least one substantive post (500 words or more) to receive a passing grade for this component. Beyond that, there is no single right format. Something like a couple of substantive posts, few short posts, and some thoughtful comments on your peers is the expectation for B and A range work. The writing on the longer posts is evaluated in the same way as the papers, although the blog contribution overall is evaluated on a portfolio model: what you have at the end of the term is the basis of your grade. Lest you have to wait until the end of the term to get a sense of how you are doing, *your first substantive blog post will be evaluated with a diagnostic grade*. "Diagnostic" means "this grade doesn't count, but if I had to grade it, that's what it would get." Those comments will be provided to you in an audio-video format.

The blog portfolio will be worth 35% of your course grade.

General paper grading standards

- A/A– Paper offers a clearly stated, interesting thesis which is supported with valid and sound arguments. The paper shows that the writer has thought about the assignment and developed his or her own ideas about it, instead of just offering minimal responses to the different components of the assignment. Interpretations of theories are sophisticated and supported with textual evidence; more than one source is considered. Writing is between good and brilliant: the organization of the paper is clear, prose is good and grammar flawless.
- B/B+ Paper offers a clearly stated thesis which is supported with for the most part valid and sound arguments. The paper stays on topic, considering all the

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relevant aspects of the assignment. Interpretations of theories are plausible and supported with textual evidence; more than one source is considered. Writing, including outline and grammar, is solid.

- B– Paper offers a thesis and attempts to support it with arguments. However, the thesis is simplistic and/or the arguments weak or unconnected to the thesis. Interpretations are weak or problematic, textual evidence weak. Paper only uses one textual source. Writing and organization have problems that affect readability.
- C/C+ Paper offers a minimal thesis and minimal or no arguments in its support. Interpretations are misguided and/or unsupported with any evidence. Writing — both at the level of paper organization and grammar — is problematic.
- D+/C– No thesis, no arguments or no textual evidence. Organization incoherent, writing very awkward and borders on unintelligible.
- D No thesis, no arguments, no evidence. Writer has no conception of most rudimentary aspects of writing (paragraphs, outline).
- E The paper displays a fundamental lack of understanding of the principles that guide scholarly endeavors. Examples include but aren't limited to gross mistakes in citing source materials as well as significant errors in framing the paper (e.g., writing a short story instead of an essay).

Grade grievances

1. Wait 24 hours after receiving the grade before approaching the GSI.
2. Provide an explanation **in writing** for why the grade you received was unfair.
3. If you are unsatisfied with your GSI's response, you may write an appeal to the professor. This appeal must include your original explanation to the GSI and a written explanation for why it is unfair.

Departmental grade grievance procedures are outlined on the political science website, at <http://www.polisci.lsa.umich.edu/undergrad/grievance.html>.

Calendar

- Sept. 14 Introduction. No reading prior to class. In-class reading of "An Exhortation Concerning Good Order, and Obedience to Rulers and Magistrates." Short in-class writing.

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- Sept. 21 Max Weber, "Science as a Vocation."
John Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*.
- Sept. 28 Montesquieu, *Persian Letters*, pp 7–180.
- Oct. 5 Montesquieu, *Persian Letters*, 181–273.
- Oct. 12 Kirstie McClure, Difference, "Diversity and the Limits of Toleration," *Political Theory*, 18:3 (1990), pp. 361–391.*
Gil Anidjar, "Secularism," *Critical Inquiry* 33 (2006), pp. 52–77.*
- Oct. 19 Fall study break**
- Oct. 26 Eamonn Callan, "Discrimination and Religious Schooling," in Will Kymlicka and Wayne Norman, eds., *Citizenship in Diverse Societies*. Oxford: OUP, 2000.*
Jeff Spinner-Halev, "Extending Diversity: Religion in Public and Private Education," in Kymlicka & Norman.*
Glenn Gould, "The Quiet in the Land" (1977) in *Solitude Trilogy*, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 1992. **Audio recording.**
- Nov. 2 Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great*, chs. 1–10.
- Nov. 9 Hitchens, *God Is Not Great*, chs. 11–19.
- Nov. 16 Terry Eagleton, *Reason Faith and Revolution*, chs. 1–2.
- Nov. 23 Eagleton, *Reason, Faith and Revolution*, chs. 3–4
James Wood, "The New Anti-Atheists," *New Yorker*, Aug. 31, 2009.*
- Nov. 30 Roxanne Euber, "Premodern, Antimodern, or Postmodern," *The Review of Politics* (1997).*
Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Modern and the Secular in the West: An Outsider's View," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 77:2 (2009), pp. 393-403.*
- Dec. 7 Student-selected readings on the Danish cartoon controversy.
- Dec. 14 Student-selected readings on the Danish cartoon controversy

Texts marked with an asterisk (*) are accessible in the "Readings" folder on the course website's Resources.