

**RSOC 194**  
***Modern Religious Thought***  
**Santa Clara University**  
**Department of Religious Studies**  
**Spring 2015**

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**Course Description**

This class poses and explores possible answers to the following two questions: Is philosophy a religious tradition? Whether or not it is deemed a religion, has a philosophical way of life, and not only certain philosophical ways of thinking, informed the creation and maintenance of the modern era? These sound like, and are, unusual questions given the commonly held view that “philosophy” refers to a strictly theoretical, often abstract and impractical, set of practices. In light of our guiding questions, and several related questions – What is at stake in posing these questions? Do their answers perhaps promise to explain at least in part the course of modern religious history and modern history more generally? – we will undertake an advanced inquiry into the relation of modern philosophical thought, most especially as it bears on ethics and social and political organization, to the birth and life of the modern era. We will examine the nature of modern philosophy not only in terms of its ideas, but even more so, and first of all, the effect of its ideas on ethical and social and political life in Western Europe and East Asia.

The course is divided into three sections. The first part of the course will be devoted to gaining a basic understanding of the concepts, practices, and institutions of philosophy in ancient Greece and Rome. Here we will pay particular attention to philosophy’s “spiritual exercises” (P. Hadot) or “technologies of the self” (M. Foucault) and their relation to ancient philosophical communities. Next we will turn to the first glimmers of philosophy’s re-emergence as an autonomous tradition in the early modern period of European history. This will involve a consideration of the Renaissance and the scientific revolution and their role in undermining traditional religious belief and preparing the way for a new type of secular life informed by the philosophical tradition. The third portion of the class will consist in a series of studies of modern philosophical traditions and individual figures that conceived and practiced philosophy as a way of life that aspired to transform existing ethical codes, social organization, and political life: the Enlightenment-era *Philosophes*, Marx and Marxist traditions, Friedrich Nietzsche, and several contemporary philosophers who practice philosophy as a form of life.

**Course Texts**

Andre Comte-Sponville, *The Little Book of Atheist Spirituality*

Luc Ferry, *A Brief History of Thought: A Philosophical Guide to Living*  
Pierre Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*  
Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Nietzsche Reader* (ed., Ansell Pearson)

+ A variety of digital handouts available on our Camino/Canvas course page as well as several free online texts.

### **Course Requirements and Grade Weights**

Four short critical essays that call upon you to engage a theme or issue relevant to one of the four course sections; a research paper; active class participation

Course Engagement\*: 10%

Quizzes: 20%

Term Paper: 70%

There will be weekly *quizzes* to ensure that you are keeping up with and comprehending the readings.

The *term paper* (8-10 pages) is your major assignment in the class. It is meant to draw the different sections of the course together in relation to the overarching question we are addressing. So, you will be asked to take a position: Is philosophy a religious tradition? A para-religious tradition? Another kind of tradition? What you will have to assume no matter your view and argument, is that philosophy is a tradition that has sought at various points in its history to transform the personal and collective lives of people, and you will need to show that you understand the role that spiritual exercises played and play in these transformations.

#### **\*Note the following:**

- (1) Attendance is mandatory. You will be required to sign a sheet verifying your presence each class period, or, once I know everyone, I will note absences without a sign-in sheet. Unless an unexpected emergency arises, you must let me know beforehand if you will be missing a class. *For each unexcused absence one point will be deducted from your overall final course grade.*
- (2) Your *course engagement* grade will be based on the degree to which you abide by five rules: (1) you must display the neutral and empathetic manner of approaching the subject matter; (2) talking in class is not permitted, unless your comments are directed to the whole class or, when appropriate, to the members of your discussion group; (3) you will treat the other members of the class – your fellow classmates and your instructor – with the kind of respect and dignity that you expect others to display toward you; (4) you will come prepared for each class, which means that you will have completed that day's reading assignment, and you will be prepared to answer questions posed by your instructor related to that assignment; and (5) in your discussion group, you will actively engage your fellow group members.

## **Prerequisites**

You **must** have completed your **first** and **second** level course requirement in *Religious Studies* in order to be eligible to take this class.

## **Office Hours and E-mails**

The hours specified above are my regular office hours. Individually or in groups, I encourage you to visit me to discuss ideas, questions, assignments, etc. If you are unable to visit during my regular office hours, please e-mail me to schedule an appointment. I will do my best to respond to your e-mails within 48 hours; I would ask that you do the same.

## **Angel Course Management System**

You are **required** to use the University's online course management system in this course. This means, each of us should enroll in this section on our online course page by the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> week of classes.

## **Disability Accommodation Policy**

Those of us with a disability or other impairment for which accommodations will be requested should work through Disability Resources.

## **Grading Policies and Regulations\***

A	95%-100%
A-	90%-94%
B+	87%-89%
B	83%-86%
B-	80%-82%
C+	77%-79%
C	73%-76%
C-	70%-72%
D+	67%-69%
D	63%-66%
D-	60%-62%
F:	59% or less

*\*For the standard sense of each grade (A, B, etc.), please refer to Undergraduate Bulletin. Specific policies related to individual assignments will be given along with those assignments as is appropriate.*

## **Academic Integrity and Related Expectations**

Throughout this course we should conduct ourselves in accordance with the academic integrity standards and policies articulated in the University Bulletin.

## **Subject to Change**

This syllabus is subject to change in the event of extenuating circumstances. If you are absent from class, it is your responsibility to check on announcements and changes made while you were absent.