

## SYLLABUS SF II

### Course Description

#### *The Meaning of Life: Between Faith, Reason and Visions*

Human existence is characterized by the unknown: the great mystery of life and death. Throughout time and space, many great thinkers, visionaries and philosophers have offered their perspectives on the meaning of life. This course explores some of the answers given from different religious, social, ethnic and political backgrounds: from the birth of Islam to the discovery of the Americas, from the visions of Christian female mystics, to the Tibetan Buddhist reflection on death; from the emphasis on human free will of the Renaissance to the focus on divine predestination of the Reformation. This course invites students to consider great ideas that have often helped earlier peoples organize their lives, but which have also set them in conflict, sometimes with other communities, sometimes among themselves. Such ideas have sparked movements for ethical and social reform, for conquest, for the recovery of lost classics, and for religious renewal. Religious conflicts lead to civil war, and modern science emerges as a challenge to traditional beliefs. Throughout, different conceptions of human nature emerge and collide. Oppression gives rise to new movements for greater equality and individual rights, and bitter struggles for power lead to the creation of large new colonial empires, whose effects linger to the present day. This course takes a global perspective and uses an interdisciplinary approach; students are expected to consider these ideas and developments critically, with an eye to their philosophical, political and historical significance.

#### *Focus of the Course:*

*How to achieve religious tolerance and social co-existence*

This course aims to help students understand how these earlier conceptions speak to their own lives and how these earlier ideas connect to the world today. We will reflect on how to achieve religious tolerance and social co-existence. In order to do this, this course will provide an interactive environment where students directly engage in group discussions and multidisciplinary projects. We will develop an open conversation to enrich each participant in their intellectual, existential and social perspectives.

### Schedule of Readings, Lectures, and Discussions

#### *September*

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|---------------|------------|---|
| <b>Week 1</b> | <b>9/2</b> | Introduction to the course, its goals, contents and requirements.   |
| <b>Week 2</b> | <b>9/7</b> | <b>LABOR DAY – NO CLASSES</b>   |
|               | <b>9/9</b> | <b>Introduction to the Middle Ages</b><br><i>Readings:</i><br>Eliade, M. “A History of Religious Ideas” (selected chapter)<br><br><i>Topics:</i><br>The Fall of Rome and The Rise of Christianity |

**Week 3**                    **9/14 Christian Monastic Life**  
**Benedict of Nursia (c. 480-543)**

*Readings:*  
The Rule of St. Benedict

**9/16 Christian Women Mystics**  
**Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179)**

*Readings:*  
Scivias (selected passages)

*Movie:*  
Visions (von Trotta, 2009)

*Topics:*  
Female Mystics

**Week 4**                    **9/21 Scholastic Philosophy**  
**Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274)**

*Readings:*  
Summa Theologiæ (selected passages)

**9/23 Scholastic Philosophy**  
**Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274)**

*Readings:*  
Summa Theologiæ (selected passages)

**Week 5**                    **9/28 Introduction to Islam**  
**Mohammed (c. 570- 632)**

*Documentary:*  
“Islam: Empire of Faith” (53 min.)

*Readings:*  
The Quran, Introduction (p. XI-XXV)

**9/30 The Quran**

*Readings:*  
Suras 1-3, 17, 55, 112.

**October**

**Week 6**                    **10/05 Muslim Mysticism: Sufism**  
**Rabia Basri (ca. 718-801)**  
**Rumi (1207-1273)**

*Readings:*

Rabia Basri, Poems  
Rumi, Spiritual Couplets

**10/07 Visit to the Library: Tools for Research**

+ **How to write an academic essay**

**Week 7**

**10/12 FALL BREAK-NO CLASSES**

**10/14 Workshop “Social Foundations” 1**

**FIRST ESSAY DUE**

**Presentation of First Essay  
(Print it and submit a hard copy)**

**Week 8**

**10/19 Tibetan Buddhism**

*Readings:*

Eliade, M. “A History of Religious Ideas n. 3” (pp. 262-284)

**10/21 Tibetan Buddhism  
The Bardo Thodol (14<sup>th</sup> Century ca.)**

*Readings:*

The Tibetan Book of the Dead (selected passages)

**Week 9**

**10/26 Midterm Revision**

+ **Class Evaluation (anonymous)**

*Documentary:*

The Tibetan Book of the Dead (by Barrie Mc Lean, 2004)  
(narrated by Leonard Cohen)

**10/28 Midterm Revision**

**Week 10**

**11/02 MIDTERM EXAMINATION**

**11/04 The Conquest of the Americas  
Las Casas, Destruction of the Indies**

*Readings:*

Las Casas, Destruction of the Indies (1552) (selected passages)

**Week 11**

**11/09 The Renaissance  
Humanism**

*Readings:*

Erasmus, On Free Will (1524)

**11/11 The Reformation  
Luther (1483-1546)**

*Readings:*

Luther, On the Bondage of the Will (1525)

*Topics:*

Erasmus and Luther

The issue of free will and predestination

**Week 12**

**11/16 René Descartes (1596-1650)**

*Readings:*

Meditations on First Philosophy (1641) (selected passages)

**11/18 René Descartes (1596-1650)**

*Readings:*

Meditations on First Philosophy (1641) (selected passages)

**Week 12**

**11/23 Workshop “Social Foundations” 2**

**+ Presentation of Second Essay**  
(Print it and submit a hard copy)

SECOND ESSAY DUE

**11/25 Thanksgiving - No Classes**

**Week 13**

**11/30 Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677)**

*Readings:*

Ethics (selected passages)

**December**

**12/2 John Locke (1632-1704)**

*Readings:*

A Letter Concerning Toleration

**Week 14**

**12/7 Workshop “Social Foundations” 3**

*Topic:*

Religious Toleration and Social Co-Existence

**+ Class Evaluation**

**+ Extra-Activities**

**12/9 Revision for Final Exam**

+ Return of Second Essay

**Week 15**                      **12/14 End-of-Semester Celebration**  
(Sharing Circle)

**Note**

*This syllabus may be subject to slight changes.*

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**List of Texts**

1. Aquinas, T. *A Summary of Philosophy*, Hackett Publishing Company, 2003. Transl. by Richard J. Regan. ISBN: 0872206572.
2. Descartes, R. *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Hackett Publishing Company, 1993. Trans. By Donald A. Cress. ISBN: 0872201929.
3. Las Casas, B. *An Account, Much Abbreviated, of the Destruction of the Indies*. Hackett Publishing Company, 2003. Trans. by Andrew Hurley. ISBN: 0872206254.
4. The Quran, Oxford University Press. Trans. M.A.S. Abdel Haleem. ISBN: 019957071X.
5. Eliade, M. *A History of Religious Ideas, Vol. 3: From Muhammad to the Age of Reforms*, University of Chicago Press, 1988. Trans. by Alf Hiltebeitel and Diane Apostolos-Cappadona. ISBN: 0226204057.

**Online**

Readings listed in the syllabus and not found here will be provided in digital form.

**Course Requirements**

1. Midterm and final examinations are a mix of short essay questions, as well as multiple choice ones.
2. Two essays, 1,500 words, typed, 1.5 spacing (1" margin on all sides, font: Times New Roman 12). These essays must reflect your understanding of the texts covered in class as described above. You will be expected to do a close reading that includes textual analysis, as well as demonstrating strong argumentative and rhetorical skills (do not simply summarize the text). Students are encouraged to develop one of the papers on specific topics of interest upon approval. Electronic or late submission of the essays will not be accepted.
3. Two shifts as "host" (see "Grading" n. 2).
4. One Extra-Activity and One Workshop.

**Grading**

1. Attendance and participation: 10%

- 2. Hosting (2 shifts, 5% each): 10%
- 3. Essays (20% each): 40%
- 4. Midterm and Final exam (10% each): 20%
- 5. Writing Assignments: 10%
- 6. Extra-credits (1 shift): 5%
- 7. Workshop (1 shift): 5%

1. Attendance and Participation: Students are required to attend every class, do the assigned reading, and finish all course work on time. Students must bring the assigned book(s) and/or text(s) to class and be prepared for discussions. This grading is a reward for being active and inspiring during the class discussions and in the workshops “Social Foundations” 1-3.

2. Hosting: This grading will be devoted to covering a number of shifts (2) as hosts, according to these guidelines. For each class, we will designate a team of (2 or 3) hosts in a balanced rotation. Each host will give a 5 minute presentation on a topic selected between the material indicated in the section “Topics,” or independently proposed (upon prior agreement). These presentations shall be done with slides. Once they have presented, each host will share their slides with the classmates on the course website.

b. After the designated leaders have presented, we will open the discussion to all the participants. This is the class etiquette, which will be enforced and maintained:

- everyone has the opportunity and feels welcome to present their view; no-one feels discriminated against based on their gender, race, ethnicity, religion, political or personal view, physical (dis)abilities, personal characteristics etc.
- the discussion is balanced in tone and in the amount of time offered to each discussant and to each presenter (everyone respectfully taking the podium; no-one left in the shadow)

Note that the use of neutral language is mandatory both in your writing as well as in the classroom. Make sure to use gender-neutral language and race-neutral words; avoid expressions that stereotype or patronize LBGT persons as well as people of different ethnicities, religions, beliefs, physical and/or intellectual (dis)abilities.

3. Writing Assignments: Post them online, on NYU Classes. I will check them periodically over the semester.

### **Extra-credits**

- 6. Visits to related exhibits / museums / conferences (upon prior agreement and with related proofs of attendance). You will have to give a 3 minutes presentation in class. Credits: up to 5%.
- 7. Covering an extra shift as host. If you have already covered your required turns (see “Grading / Attendance and Participation”), and there is a need for a host, you may volunteer (no more than one extra shift for each student). Credits: up to 5%.
- 8. A short lecture / performance / video based on one of your essays. This assignment is intended as a way to share your research with your classmates and train you to face international audiences. This presentation shall last no more than 5 minutes and shall not be a mere reading of your essay. It shall include slides / multimedia / performative arts / rhetorical skills: creativity and originality are strongly encouraged and will be evaluated positively. Credits: up to 5%.

9. Volunteers may develop the results of the workshops (see “Workshop”) into printed copies / slide shows / acts / art pieces. In the last class, the works produced by the volunteers will be presented in teams and distributed (if printed). Credits: up to 5%.

### **Workshop**

This workshop (developed in 3 classes) is aimed at experiencing first hand the task of setting a document for posterity, a list of foundational maxims outlined for the evolution of a just and equal society. The development will incur in 4 stages:

Stage n. 1: each student will present 3 maxims which they consider necessary for the foundation of a just society. By similitudes (having pointed out similar aspects), they will congregate in small groups.

Stage n. 2: each small group will present between 3 to 5 maxims, based on unanimous approval (majoritarian policies will not be allowed: the goal is to identify how mutual respect and compromise in social relations can be achieved). By similitudes (having pointed out similar aspects), the groups will congregate in 4 larger groups.

Stage n. 3: enriched by the new readings they have been exposed to, each group will present up to 8 maxims (unanimous approval is required). After the presentations, each group will highlight the points in common with the other groups. These points will be written down.

Stage n. 4. The whole class together will compile a collective document entitled “Social Foundations”, consisting of up to 10 maxims, as a result of the discussions and exchanges developed in Workshops 1-2-3.

### **Computer & Electronic Devices Policy**

No computer or other electronic devices allowed during student presentations (except for students with documented special needs).

Before entering the class, make sure that your phone is turned off or, in case of personal emergencies, silenced (please, inform me if so before the class starts).

### **Absence Policy**

Absence and repeated lateness will diminish the grade (more than six absences without legitimate excuse will result in failure for the course). Below is the Absence Policy according to LSP guidelines:

\* Please furnish me with a written explanation if you miss two consecutive classes.

\* If you miss more than three classes for reasons besides religious observance, your class participation grade will fall by five points per each absence.

\* Be aware that it is my duty to contact the Advising Office to make further inquiries should you miss four consecutive classes.

\* You cannot pass the course if you miss six consecutive classes for any reason (excluding religious observance).

\* If you miss more than six (non-consecutive) classes for reasons besides religious observance, you cannot pass the course.

If you plan to miss any classes for religious observance this semester, please let me know their dates by the end of the first week of the term. You will not in any way be penalized for such absences, but I may require you to submit any work due for these classes in advance.

A maximum of two absences related to documented medical conditions will be excused.

### **Plagiarism & Academic Rigor**

NYU faculty take your scholarly work seriously. We expect you to read your assignments thoroughly, analyze them carefully, and articulate your understanding clearly. Academic honesty is a required standard. For these reasons, plagiarism (that is, presenting someone else's ideas, works or words as your own), is simply not tolerated and will result in failure of the course for the student who plagiarizes. Please refer to Liberal Studies Program's *Student Handbook* for a better understanding of plagiarism.

### **Differently-Abled Students**

Differently-abled students who believe that they may need accommodations in this class are encouraged to contact the Moses Center for Students with Disabilities at (212) 998-4980 as soon as possible to better ensure that such accommodations are implemented in a timely fashion. For more information, see the CSD website: <http://www.nyu.edu/osl/csd>.

### **Office Hours**

TBA  
or by appointment.

Emails will be answered within 24 hours (M-F):  
[ff32@nyu.edu](mailto:ff32@nyu.edu)