

## **RELI-210: Secularism and Its Discontents**

**Vassar College**

### **Course Description**

...the beginnings of culture are rooted in religious experiences and beliefs. Furthermore, even after they are radically secularized, such cultural creations as social institutions, technology, moral ideas, arts, etc., cannot be correctly understood if one does not know their original religious matrix, which they tacitly criticized, modified, or rejected in becoming what they are now: secular cultural values.

— Mircea Eliade, "A New Humanism"

What does it mean to say that we live in a secular age? Almost everyone would agree that in some sense we do...But it's not so clear in what this secularity consists."

— Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*

Is there a distinct realm called the secular that is free of and from the religious? As sons and daughters of the Enlightenment, we've come to think not only that there is, but also that such a realm is crucial to politics. This class both traces and interrogates this assumption. What sort of philosophical and historical moments have led to an insistence on a non-religious space? How have different versions of the secular shaped the ethics of human identity and the politics of the public square? We will entertain the ironic possibility that secularism possesses a religious history of its own. We will also contest the assumption that the secular is everything that religion is not. We will ask whether it is possible or even desirable—in our politics, in our public institutions, in our selves—to create realms scrubbed free of the religious. Ultimately, we will ask if there are better ways to conceive of the secular and the religious, ways that acknowledge their mutual dependence rather than their mutual exclusivity.

### **Course Requirements**

Requirements include careful reading of weekly assignments, avid class participation, respectful and passionate exchange of ideas, a collaborative class presentation with classmate, 2 short papers, (3 pages), and final paper on a topic of your choosing (8 pages). Final grades will be tabulated according to the following formula, class participation, 15%; short papers 35%; class presentation 10%, final paper, 40%

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## Presentation Expectations

Your task, when making a presentation, is to identify two or three passages that would be good for the class to discuss and to frame those passages with appropriate introductory remarks and questions. You should also have a few additional passages in mind. The ideal presentation is one that is likely, because of its selection and framing of passages, to initiate an excellent discussion. Feel free to discuss your plan me ahead of time, either by email or in person.

## Required Texts— at the Vassar College Bookstore

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- Alexis De Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (Penguin)
  - Terry Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate* (Yale)
  - Robert A. Markus, *Christianity and the Secular* (Notre Dame)
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## Students With Special Needs

“Academic accommodations are available for students with documented disabilities. Please schedule an appointment with the instructor early in the semester to discuss any accommodations for this course which have been approved by the Director of Disability and Support Services as indicated in your accommodation letter.”

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## January 21 - January 27

Jan 24, Th: Course Introduction

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## January 28 - February 3

Jan 29, Tu:

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- Richard Rorty, “Religion as a Conversation Stopper” **[M]**
  - Nicholas Wolterstorff, “An Engagement with Rorty” **[M]**
  - Richard Rorty, “Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration” **[M]**
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Jan 31, Th

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- Jeffrey Stout, "Religion in Political Argument," "Secularization and Resentment," (92-100) **[M]**
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## February 4 - February 10

### The Secular and Early Christianity

Feb 5, Tu

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- Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" **[M]**
  - Markus, "Christianity and the Secular," 1-30
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Feb 7, Th

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- Markus, "Christianity and the Secular," 31-69
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## February 11 - February 17

### The Secular and Early Modernity

Feb 12, Tu

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- Descartes, "*Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641), Letter of Dedication, First and Second, Third  
Meditations <http://oregonstate.edu/instruct/phl302/texts/descartes/meditations/meditations.htm>  
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Feb 14, Th

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- Luther, "On Governmental Authority" (1523) **[M]**
  - Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract* (1762) **IV:8.**
  - Kant, "What is Enlightenment" (1784) **[M]**
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## February 18 - February 24

### The American Secular

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Feb 19, Tu

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- (<http://www.law.indiana.edu/uslawdocs/declaration.html>)
  - Hamburger, *Separation of Church and State*, 1-17 [M]
  - Derrida, "Declarations of Independence," [M]
  - Bonnie Honig, "Declarations of Independence" [M]
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Feb 21, Th

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- Thomas Jefferson, "A Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom," "Letter to the Danbury Baptist Association" [M]
  - Hamburger, *Separation of Church and State* "Jefferson and the Baptists" [M]
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## February 25 - March 3

Feb 26, Tu

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- Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*: 219-231, 282--300, 323-334, 336-352, 493-503, 510-518, 521-523, 583-600.
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Feb 28, Th

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- Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 604-639.
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## March 4 - March 10

Mar 5, Tu

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- Lincoln, "The Second Inaugural"
  - Patrick Deneen, "A Model of Democratic Charity"
  - Robert Bellah, "American Civil Religion"
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Mar 7, Th

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- Nicholas Wolterstorff, “How Social Justice Got to Me and Why It Never Left,” excerpts from *Justice*
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## **March 11 - March 17**

Spring Break

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## **March 18 - March 24**

Spring Break

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## **March 25 - March 31**

- Wood, Richard L., *Faith in Action*, 125-151
  - Morris, Aldon D., *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, 40-76, 139-173, 275-290.
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Mar 28, Th

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- David Chappell, *A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow*, 87-130
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## **April 1 - April 7**

**Post-Colonial Critiques**

April 2, Tu

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- Judith Butler, “Introduction” to *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism*
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April 4, Th

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- Talal Asad, “Thinking about religion, belief, and politics”
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## **April 8 - April 14**

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**April 9, Tu (see previous week for reading)**

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- Saba Mahmood, "Secularism, Hermeneutics, and Empire: The Politics of Islamic Reformation," *Public Culture*, Spring 2006; 18: 323 - 347. **[M]**
  - Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape*, "Introduction"
  - Walter Benjamin, "The Story Teller"
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April 11 Th

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- Charles Taylor, "Introduction," from *A Secular Age*
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**April 15 - April 21**

**FRIDAY APRIL 19--SECOND PAPER DUE**

April 16 Tu

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- Taylor, *A Secular Age*, excerpt--see above reading
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April 18, Th

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- William Connolly, *Pluarlism*, 121-130
  - Simon During, "Competing Secularism"
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**April 22 - April 28**

**Agonistic Respect**

April 23 Tu

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- Eagleton, Preface, chs, 1, 2
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April 25 Th

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- Eagleton, chs 3, 4
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## **April 29 - May 5**

### **The University and the Secular**

April 30 Tu

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- Stanley Hauerwas, "Theological Knowledge and the Knowledges of the University: Beginning Explorations" and "The State of the Secular: Theology, Prayer, and the University"
  - John Sommerville, "Universities Are Corporatized Because They Are Secularized," "The Exhaustion of Secularism"
  - David Brooks, "The Practical University," <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/05/opinion/Brooks-The-Practical-University.html>
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May 2 Th

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- David Ford, "Faith and Universities in a Religious and Secular World," Parts I and II
  - Michael Roth, "Beyond Critical Thinking"
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## **May 6 - May 12**

May 7 Tu – Wrap up

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- Stout, "The Folly of Secularism"
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