

RS 792: Continental Philosophy and Religious Thought
Winter 2021
Tuesdays, 1:30 – 3:30 (via Zoom)
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We don't begin with Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, but we could begin with his postulation of the "nasty ditch" (*der garstiger Graben*) between the accidental truths of history and the necessary truths of reason that "Continental Philosophy" and contemporary "Religious Thought" have been seeking to bridge for a long time. We begin with Feuerbach (1804-72) who represents the transition of post-Hegelian philosophy from idealism to naturalism and materialism. As Marx said we all have to pass through the "fiery brook" of Feuerbach; hence his important "Theses on Feuerbach"—"resolving the religious world into its secular basis." But Feuerbach was also deeply important for theologians like Karl Barth and we know that George Eliot (the great Victorian novelist, MaryAnn Evans) translated it in tears into English: even as it destroyed her naïve Christian faith, it helped her accomplish her novelistic movement from suffering to sympathy over against utilitarian ethics.

It did something else, perhaps not unrelated, for Marx—attunement to the material, embodied and practical language of "real life" (not religious abstraction), but Kierkegaard also recognized affinities at the existential level of interpreting Christianity, especially the integration of a religion of the heart and embodied practical reason. The *Philosophical Fragments* (Climacus) inverts Feuerbach's projection theory to interesting dialectical effect, and *Practice in Christianity* (Anti-Climacus) radicalizes this in the direction of embodied "contemporaneity" with Christ. Which is why it will be interesting to end with Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History" that inverts Marx with a messianic materialist historiography.

Required texts:

Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Eliot
The Marx-Engels Reader, ed. Robert C. Tucker (though the texts are also available on the Marx/Engels Internet Archive)
Soren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments* (either Swenson or Hong transl'ns are fine)
Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity* (Hong trans.) or *Training in Christianity* (Lowrie)
Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History" in *Illuminations* (ed. Arendt)

I will also make some primary and secondary materials available on A2L course site

Requirements and Evaluation:

Participation 30 %

Careful reading and preparation of texts is required in order to participate actively in the weekly seminar discussions. Students are expected to respond orally to each seminar presentation, raising points of criticism, alternative interpretation, and questions for discussion.

To prepare for each seminar students are invited to come to the seminar with one or two substantial passages for interpretation and at least one significant question of interpretation to be discussed, related to the course theme. These may be submitted to the professor as a record of preparation/participation.

Seminar presentations 30 %

Students will be responsible for two seminar presentations on an assigned seminar reading. The presentation will interpret its contribution to the seminar topic by focusing on specific passages, providing comparative analysis where relevant, and raising critical, interpretive questions for further discussion. The presentations (10-15 minutes) may be read or presented informally, though an outline at least should be submitted to the instructor. After the presentation seminar participants will respond and the presenter will have opportunity to address and engage the responses. In the final seminar session enrolled students will make brief presentations on their essay topics for discussion.

Seminar essay 40 %

A ca. 12-15 page typed double-spaced paper on a topic pertaining to the seminar. Students are encouraged to consult with the professor on their topics. Students will provide a presentation of their research paper topic at the final session. Late papers will be downgraded unless there is a prior agreement with the professor. Due date is **April 26**.

Course Schedule:

- Jan. 12 – Introductory session
- 19 – Feuerbach, *Essence of Christianity*, Intro. – Chp. XIV
- 26 – Feuerbach, *Essence of Christianity*, Chp. XV – end
- Feb. 2 – Marx, “Intro. To Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right* “Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844”
- 9 – Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach”; “The German Ideology, Part I”
- 16 – Term Break (no seminar)
- 23 – Kierkegaard, *Climacus: Philosophical Fragments*, Preface to Appendix to Part III
- Mar. 2 – Kierkegaard, *Climacus: Philosophical Fragments*, Part IV – end
- 9 – Kierkegaard, *Anti-Climacus: Practice in Christianity*, No. I
- 16 – Kierkegaard, *Anti-Climacus: Practice in Christianity*, No. II

23 – Kierkegaard, *Anti-Climacus: Practice in Christianity*, No. III

30 – Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History”

Apr. 6 – Conclusion: discussion of course and seminar papers

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