

**ICS Calendar Title:** Religion and Philosophy at the Extremes of Human Experience

**ICS Course Code:** ICSD 13210 S15

**Instructor:** Joseph Kirby

**Term and Year:** Summer 2015 (Distance)

**Last Updated:** February 6, 2015

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### **1. Course Description**

John Newton, who wrote the lyrics for “Amazing Grace” in 1772, was the captain of a slave ship prior to entering the clergy. In other words, the man to whom the words “a wretch like me” originally referred – was actually a thoroughgoing wretch, a man who bought and sold human beings for profit. The grace that saved him, meanwhile, first appeared over the course of an extended brush with death: the ship he was on almost sank in a violent North Atlantic gale, then floated at the mercy of the winds and currents for nearly a month before drifting fortuitously onto the coast of Northern Ireland.

We live most of our lives in a state of relative equilibrium, calmly passing through more-or-less predictable sequences of habit and custom, work and play, activity and rest. This course will explore what happens when these predictable sequences vanish, when we no longer know where we are or where we are going, what we should do, who we should strive to become. We will focus in particular on how religion and philosophy operate, both experientially and discursively, when the normal equilibrium of our lives has been shattered. This will involve a comparison between two opposing approaches to these edges: in short, the very suffering that often seems necessary to open the soul out unto God is often cited as evidence that God cannot possibly exist, that religion is nothing more than a retreat into illusion spurred by the fear of death. Thus, beginning with a comparison between Victor Frankl’s account of his experiences in the Nazi death camps, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, and Freud’s classic denunciation of religion in *The Future of an Illusion*, this course explores how the tension between devastation, hope, and despair has played out in various other extremes of human experience.

## 2. Reading Schedule

Session 1: Introduction

Sessions 2-3: Victor Frankl's *Man's Search For Meaning*

Sessions 4: Freud's *The Future of an Illusion*

Session 5: Tolstoy's *A Confession*

Session 6: Dostoevsky's *Notes From Underground*, part one; Olthuis' *Beautiful Risk*, chapters 1-2

Sessions 7: Hannah Arendt's *Life of the Mind*, "Introduction"; Koestler's "The Hours by the Window," from *The Invisible Writing*

Sessions 8-9: Plato's *Gorgias*, Matthew 1-7

Sessions 10-11: Jonathan Lear's *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation*

Session 12: Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, chapters 1-2

Session 13: Conclusion

## 3. Course Requirements

- a) To grapple with some fundamental existential questions – life and death, good and evil, hope and despair – through reading and discussing the accounts of people who have lived through extreme hardship.
- b) To consider religion and philosophy not insofar as they manifest in average everyday experience, but rather insofar as they manifest at the extremes of experience – to consider how questions of rationality and irrationality appear at the edges of life and death.
- c) To reflect upon how we might live and act, or change the way we live and act in our average everyday lives, based upon these accounts of people who lived through such dissolutions.

## 4. Description and Weighting of Elements to be Evaluated

- a) Total reading (1250 pages):
- b) In-seminar leadership: Taking turns leading discussion of assigned materials
- c) Description of course project: 3000-4000 words (MWS); 4,000–6,000 words (MA); on topic of student's interest within the purview of the course.

- d) Description and weighting of elements to be evaluated:
- i. Class participation: 10 % (TST 20%)
  - ii. Seminar Presentations: 30%
  - iii. Research Project/Paper: 60% (TST 50%)

## 5. Required Readings

- Arendt, Hannah. *The Life of the Mind*. New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1978, pages 3-16. (13 pages) [ICS Library Reserve Shelf: B29 .A73 1981]
- Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *Notes from Underground*. Trans. Ralph E. Matlaw. Toronto: Penguin, 1991), pages 3-36. (33 pages) (2011  
<http://go.utlib.ca/cat/8859498>)
- Frankl, Victor. *Man's Search for Meaning*. Toronto: Washington Square Press, 1984. (115 pages) [ICS Library Reserve Shelf: D805 .G3 F713 ;  
<http://www.sciencelib.net/3718/mans-search-for-meaning-viktor-e-frankl.html>]
- Freud, Sigmund. *The Future of an Illusion*. In *The Penguin Freud Library Volume 12: Civilization, Society, and Religion*. Toronto: Penguin, 1991. (60 pages)  
[\[http://www.adolphus.nl/xcrpts/xcfreudill.html\]](http://www.adolphus.nl/xcrpts/xcfreudill.html)
- Koestler, Arthur. "The Hours by the Window", in *The Invisible Writing*. New York: The MacMillan Company, 1954, pages 345-362. (17 pages) [ICS Library Reserve Shelf: PR 6021 .O4 Z53 2005]
- Lear, Jonathan. *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006. (154 pages) [ICS Library Reserve Shelf: BJ 52 .L43 2006]
- Levi, Primo. *The Drowned and the Saved*. Trans. Raymond Rosenthal. London: Abacus, 1988, pages 11-51. (40 pages) [ICS Library Reserve Shelf: D 810 .J4 L43513 1989]
- Matthew*. NRSV. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994. (44 pages)
- Olthuis, James. *The Beautiful Risk: A New Psychology of Loving and Being Loved*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2001, pages 15-38. (23 pages) [ICS Library Reserve Shelf: BV4012.2 .O58 2001]
- Plato. *Gorgias*. Trans. Donald J. Zeyl, in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1997. (77 pages)  
[\[http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1672/1672-h/1672-h.htm\]](http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1672/1672-h/1672-h.htm)
- Tolstoy, Leo. "A Confession" in *A Confession and Other Religious Writings*. Trans. Jane Kentish. Toronto: Penguin, 1987. (61 pages)

[\[http://archive.org/stream/myconfessioncrit00tols/myconfessioncrit00tols\\_djvu.txt\]](http://archive.org/stream/myconfessioncrit00tols/myconfessioncrit00tols_djvu.txt)

## 6. Some Recommended Readings

- Frankl, Victor. *Man's Search for Ultimate Meaning*. London: Rider Books, 2000. [Gerstein Library: RC455.4 .R4 F7 1997X]
- Frankl, Victor. *The Doctor of the Soul: From Psychotherapy to Logotherapy*. Trans. Richard and Clara Winston. New York: Vintage Books, 1986. [Gerstein Library: RC480.5 .F713 1986]
- Kierkegaard, Soren. *Philosophical Fragments*. Trans. Howard and Edna Wong. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985. [ICS Library Reserve Shelf: BL51 .K487 (1936 ed.) ; UofT e-resource: <http://go.utlib.ca/cat/9872481>]
- Nagel, Thomas. "The Absurd," in *Language, Metaphysics, and Death*. Edited by John Donnelly. New York: Fordham University Press, 1978. [St. Michael's College, Kelly Library: BD444 .L377]
- Wiesel, Elie. *Night*. Trans. Stella Rodway. Toronto: Bantam Books, 1989. [Robarts Library: D811 .W4823 1960]

Students with diverse learning styles and needs are welcome in this course. In particular, if you have a disability/health consideration that may require accommodations, please feel free to approach me and/or Student Services as soon as possible.