

## SYLLABUS SF I

### Course Description *Envisioning Human Existence*

*Meaning inhabits the search...*

Since the very beginning of human civilization, humans have engaged in the quest for meaning and envisioned different paths to deal with the existential search. In this course we will explore how ancient societies developed their approaches, and how the same proposals are still present in contemporary society: from the search for immortality to the spiritual quest; from social and political justice to religious devotion. The course will explore a variety of related topics such as: the human search for meaning, the question of origin, the relationship between life and death, the human and the divine, mythology and society, the connection between social norms and individual ethics. In the first part of the course, we will read the earliest texts ever written from ancient Sumerian, Babylonian, and Egyptian original sources. We will then focus on Indian, Chinese and Persian classic literature. In the second part of the course, we will explore Western foundational texts: from Jewish religious books, to philosophies and politics of ancient Greece and Rome. In the final part of the course, we will delve into early Christianity, its origins and its different interpretations. As we read these major pillars of world heritage, we will try to understand how different traditions of thought and beliefs relate in their approaches to envisioning human existence. In order to do this, this course will provide an interactive environment where students directly engage in such an ambitious task by developing their own “Social Foundations” (a list of foundational maxims), in four workshops. This course takes a global perspective and uses an interdisciplinary approach; the ancient societies from which the texts emerged are as much objects of study as the ancient texts themselves. Students are expected to learn the tools of critical thinking, cultivate analytical skills and learn comparative textual analysis. 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 develop an open conversation to enrich each participant in their intellectual, existential and social perspectives. After all, meaning inhabits the search...

### 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 Paleolithic</b><br><i>Readings:</i><br>Eliade, M. “A History of Religious Ideas” (pp.1-28) |

- Week 3**
- 9/14 Introduction to the Neolithic**  
*Readings:*  
 Gimbutas, M. “The Language of the Goddess” (selected passages)
- Video:*  
 Video-Conference by Gimbutas, M. “The Language of the Goddess”
- 9/16 Introduction to Mesopotamia: Sumerian culture and history.**  
**The Descent of Inanna**
- Readings:*  
 Bedford Anthology, pp. 15-39
- Video:*  
 Documentary “Women and Religion” (Hughes, B.)
- Week 4**
- 9/21 Introduction to Mesopotamia: Akkadian and Assyrian culture.**  
**The Epic of Gilgamesh**  
 (Emphasis on Tablet VI, the rejection of Ishtar)
- Readings:*  
 Bedford Anthology (pp. 55-80)
- “An Offer Perfectly Refused. Gilgamesh Rejects Ishtar's Offer of Partnership”.  
 (pp. 1-15)
- 9/23 Introduction to ancient Egyptian culture and society.**  
**Maxims of Ptahhotep**
- Readings:*  
 Simpson K. W., The Literature of Ancient Egypt, pp. 1-10
- The Maxims of Ptahhotep in:  
 Simpson K. W., The Literature of Ancient Egypt, pp. 129-148
- Week 5**
- 9/28 Introduction to ancient Egyptian religion and history.**  
**Pyramid Text / The Book of the Dead**
- Readings:*  
 Bedford Anthology (pp. 93-117) / (pp. 226-228)
- Video*  
 Documentary on Ancient Egyptian Religion
- 9/30 Introduction to Buddhism and ancient Indian culture and history.**  
**Dhammapada**
- Readings:*  
 Bedford Anthology, pp. 769-775 / 1543-1548

Dhammapada, in  
A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy, pp. 272-273 / pp. 292-300

**October**

**Week 6**

**10/05 Dhammapada**

*Readings:*

Dhammapada, in  
A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy, pp. 300-328

**10/07 Visit to the Library: Tools for Research (TO BE CONFIRMED)**

**+ How to write an academic essay**

*Film*

“Little Buddha” (Bertolucci, 1993)

**Week 7**

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

**10/14 Introduction to ancient Chinese culture and history.  
Taoism**

*Readings:*

Bedford Anthology, pp. 1601-1604

Tao Te Ching, pp. 5-50

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

FIRST ESSAY DUE

**Week 8**

**10/19 Tao Te Ching - Lao Tsu**

*Readings:*

Tao Te Ching, pp. 51-91

**+ Midterm Class Evaluation (anonymous)**

**10/21 MIDTERM EXAMINATION**

**Week 9**

**10/26 Introduction to Zoroastrianism and ancient Persian culture and history.  
Zoroaster – Gathas**

*Readings:*

“The Songs of Zarathustra: The Gathas” translated by D. F. A. Bode.  
Introduction, pp.15-40  
First Gatha, pp. 43-74 (skip Yasna 32)

**10/28** Introduction to ancient Greek culture and history.  
**Pre-Socratics – Focus on Pythagoras & Heraclitus**

*Readings:*

Readings in Ancient Greek Philosophy  
(pp. 15-19 / 24-34)

Bedford Anthology, pp. 780-781.

**Week 10**

**11/02 Plato – Republic**

*Readings:*

Bedford Anthology, pp. 246-258.

Republic, Parts VI

Translated by Lee, D., pp. 157-188

(Emphasis on the Status of Women and on the Abolition of the Family)

*Video*

Documentary “Athens, The Truth about Democracy” (Hughes, B.)

**11/04 Plato – Republic**

*Readings:*

Republic, Parts VII

Translated by Lee, D., pp. 189-248

(Emphasis on the Allegory of the Cave, VII 514-520a)

Republic, Part XI

Translated by Lee, D., pp. 354-368

(Emphasis on the Myth of Er, X 614a-621d)

**Week 11**

**11/09** Introduction to Jewish culture and history.  
**Exodus (Hebrew Bible)**

*Readings:*

Bedford Anthology, pp. 126-139

Introduction to the Pentateuch, in:

The New Oxford Annotated Bible, pp. 3-7

Exodus, Chapters 1-20, in:

The New Oxford Annotated Bible, pp. 82-112

(Emphasis on Chapters 20:1-17 “The Ten Commandments”)

*(Optional) Compare translations:*

Bedford Anthology, pp. 162-168

**11/11 Exodus (Hebrew Bible)**

*Readings:*

Exodus, Chapters 21-40, in:  
The New Oxford Annotated Bible, pp. 112-141

The Dead Sea Scrolls (selected passages), in:  
Bedford Anthology, pp. 242-245

**Week 12**

**11/16 The life and teachings of Christ.  
The Gospel according to Matthew (Bible, New Testament)**

*Readings:*

Introduction to the Gospels, in:  
The New Oxford Annotated Bible, pp. 3-6

The Gospel according to Matthew, Chapters 1-13, in:  
The New Oxford Annotated Bible, pp. 7-29  
(Emphasis on Chapters 5-6-7 “The Sermon on the Mount”)

**11/18 The Gospel according to Matthew (Bible, New Testament)**

*Readings:*

The Gospel according to Matthew, Chapters 14-28, in:  
The New Oxford Annotated Bible, pp. 29-55

*Film (optional):*

Pier Paolo Pasolini's film: “The Gospel according to Matthew” (1964)

**Week 12**

**11/23 Introduction to the Gnostic Gospels.  
The Gospel of Mary**

*Readings:*

Meyer M., The Nag Hammadi Scriptures, pp. 1-13

The Gospel of Mary, in:  
The Nag Hammadi Scriptures, pp. 737-745

Pagels, E. “What Become of God the Mother? Conflicting Images of God in Early Christianity”, pp. 107-119.

**11/25 Student Thanksgiving - No Classes**

**Week 13**

**11/30 Introduction to ancient Roman culture and history & Early Christianity.  
Augustine – Confessions**

*Readings:*

Bedford Anthology, pp. 1156-1164

Augustine – Confessions, Book XI  
Trans. O'Donnell, J. J., on-line reprint of Oxford edition 1992

(Emphasis on the meaning of Time)

**December**

**12/2 Workshop “Social Foundations” 1**

**+ Presentation of Second Essay**

(Print it and submit a hard copy)

SECOND ESSAY DUE

**Week 14**

**12/7 Class Evaluation**

**Workshop “Social Foundations” 2**

Presentation of Small Groups: 3/5 maxims each

Discussion

*Assignments*

Peer-reviews (2 essays each)

**12/9 Workshop “Social Foundations” 3**

Formal groups presentations: 6-8 maxims

Compilation of collective document “Social Foundations” (8 to 12 maxims)

+ Return of Second Essay

**Week 15**

**12/14 Presentation of the collective document “Social Foundations”**

(compiled during workshops 1-3)

**End-of-Semester Celebration**

(Sharing Circle)

**Note**

*This syllabus may be subject to slight changes.*

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**List of Texts**

**Required**

Coogan, M.D. (ed.) (2001). The New Oxford Annotated Bible - Third Edition, Oxford University Press: New York.

Davis, P. / Harrison, G. et al (eds.) (2004). The Bedford Anthology of World Literature. Book 1, Bedford / St. Martin's: Boston et al.

Lao Tzu, trans. Henricks, R. G. (1992). Lao Tzu: Te-Tao Ching - A New Translation Based on the Recently Discovered Ma-wang-tui Texts (Classics of Ancient China). Ballantine Books: New York.

Plato, trans. by Lee, D. [1955] (2007). The Republic, Penguin Classics: London.

## Online Texts

Augustine, Confessions.

Electronic edition, Trans. James J. O'Donnell, SGML encoding and HTML conversion by Anne Mahoney. On-line reprint of Oxford University Press text and commentary 1992; for the Stoa Consortium 1999.

<http://www.stoa.org/hippo/frames11.html>

### Note:

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, between 1,500 and 1,800 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. Three shifts as "host" (see "Grading" n. 2).
4. One extra-activity (see "Grading" n. 6)

## Grading

1. Attendance and participation: 12 %
2. Hosting (3 shifts, 4% each): 12 %
3. Essays (20% each): 40%
4. Midterm and Final exam (10% each): 20 %
5. Reading Assignments: 12 %
6. Extra-Activity: 4%

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" 1-4.

2. Hosting: this grading will be devoted to covering a number of shifts (3) as hosts, according to these guidelines. For each class, we will designate a team of 2 hosts in a balanced rotation. The hosts will be in charge of 2 tasks:

a. Each host will give a presentation on a topic of their choice (upon prior agreement). Each presentation shall last no more than 5 to 8 minutes and they shall be done with slides. Each host shall submit their slides on the course website before the class starts.

b. After their presentations, hosts will open the discussion to all the participants. They will make sure that class etiquette is enforced and maintained:

- that 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.
- that 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 LGBT persons as well as people of different ethnicities, religions, beliefs, physical and/or intellectual (dis)abilities.

3. Assignments: to be submitted on NYU Classes before each class.

### **Workshop “Social Foundations”**

*“Study the past if you would divine the future”*  
Confucius

This workshop (developed in 4 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:

Workshop 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.

Workshop 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.

Workshop 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.

Workshop n. 4: the entire class will compile together 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.

Optional: Volunteers may develop the document into printed copies / slide shows / acts / art pieces (see section “Extra-Credits” n. 3.)

Last class: The collective document will be read aloud before the end-of-class celebration. The works produced by the volunteers will be presented in teams and distributed (if printed).

### **Extra-credits**

1. Visits to related exhibits / museums / festivals (upon prior agreement and with related proofs of

attendance).

2. Covering an extra shift as host. If you have already covered your required 3 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).
3. 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 to 8 minutes (depending on the number of applicants), 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.
4. Working on a visual presentation / or printed document / or artistic representation of the final collective document “Social Foundations”, produced in workshops 1-4. This assignment will be available on week 14, after the last workshop (n. 4). It will be presented and shared with all of the classmates on the last day of class.

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

No computer or other electronic devices allowed during class (with the exception of our 2 hosts, designated for each class, who will have access to their computers and to the internet).

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

Note:

Be aware that Wikipedia should not be quoted as an authoritative source. You can consult it for a general understanding of the topic. If you find valuable information, always double-check the data and quote established researches.

### **Office Hours**

Wednesdays 10.00-11.00 am or by appointment.

Emails will be answered within 24 hours (M-F):

[ff32@nyu.edu](mailto:ff32@nyu.edu)