

# ISS 2291: Great Books of the Medieval World

## I. General Information

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### Class Meetings

- Spring 2026
- 100% In-Person, No GTAs, 30 Residential
- Tuesday period 5-6 (11:45am-1:40pm), Thursday period 6 (12:50pm-1:40pm)
- CSE 0461
- 3 Credits

### Instructor

- Dr. Karen Taliaferro
- *Office:* CSE 0460
- *Office Hours:* Tuesdays 3:00–4:00 PM; Wednesdays 11:00-1:00 PM
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### Course Description

This multidisciplinary course explores Great Books written in the medieval Western world. During this period Christianity moved from being proscribed and persecuted to being the established religion of Western nations. The core texts of the era grapple with many of the questions which arose from that transformation. What is the relationship between the City of Man and the City of God? What lessons, if any, did the ancients have to teach to the medieval West? What hold should ancient philosophies and ways of being have on Christianity or the other major Western monotheistic religions? What is the relation of the secular to the religious authority? Students will explore these questions and others through careful study of some of the great works of literature, art, history, philosophy and politics from the medieval West. Authors to be considered include Augustine, Boethius, Alfarabi, Averroes, Maimonides, Aquinas, Dante, Petrarch, Chaucer, Christine de Pizane and Luther, among others.

## Course Objectives

1. Identify, describe, and explain the key questions preoccupying authors of classic texts of the medieval period.
2. Analyze the relationship between historical context and theological, philosophical and political questions in medieval Christian and, to a lesser extent, Jewish and Islamic societies between the late ancient world (Augustine) to the Reformation.
3. Develop and present clear and effective written and oral work that demonstrates critical engagement with course texts, and experiential learning activities.
4. Communicate well-supported ideas and arguments effectively within class discussion and debates, with clear oral presentation and written work.
5. Connect course content with students' intellectual, personal, and professional lives at UF and beyond.

## Required Readings and Works

All required readings will be posted as PDFs to Canvas.

Preferred writing manual is *Chicago Manual of Style*, 18<sup>th</sup> ed. (University of Chicago Press, 2024)

Materials and Supplies Fees: N/A.

## II. Graded Work

### Class Attendance & Absence Policy

On-time class attendance is required for this component of the course grade. You may have two unexcused absences without any penalty. Starting with the third unexcused absence, each unexcused absence reduces your attendance grade by 2/3: an A– becomes a B, and so on.

Except for absence because of religious holiday observance, documentation is required for excused absences, per university policy. Excessive unexcused absences (more than six, i.e., two weeks of the course) will result in failure of the course. If you miss four or more classes (excused or not), you will miss material essential for successful completion of the course.

### **Active Participation and Attendance: 15%**

This is a discussion-intensive course, so to do well, you need to be present and engaged. We will study difficult readings and ask difficult questions. These readings and the questions they raise encourage us to examine our own opinions by remaining open to challenge and disagreement. Your active participation throughout the semester is vital to making this work.

Participation includes asking questions (including clarifying questions), making comments relevant to the course material, or responding to the questions that I or your classmates raise. See the Participation Rubric below for more information.

### **In-Class Reading Quizzes (5 total): 25%, see dates below**

During 5 weeks of the term, students will take an in-class quiz about the assigned reading for that week. The quizzes are closed note and closed book and are designed to test your understanding of the readings.

There are no make-up options for the in-class quizzes except in the case of an excused absence. Please see me well ahead of time if you have an excused absence on a scheduled quiz day.

### **Response Papers (1200-1500 words each): 20% each (total of 40% of final grade)**

This response paper will be a 1200-1500-word analytical essay in response to a prompt provided by the instructor. The prompt will be posted on Canvas two weeks before the due date, and we will spend some time in class discussing it.

The professor will evaluate and provide written feedback with respect to grammar, punctuation, clarity, coherence and organization.

You may access the university's Writing Studio at [www.writing.ufl.edu](http://www.writing.ufl.edu)

For grading standards, see the Writing Assessment Rubric (below).

### **Experiential Learning Component: 20% TBD**

### III. Weekly Schedule

#### WEEK 1: CHRISTENDOM

The fundamental fact about the medieval West was that it was an overwhelmingly Christian society in which church and state were seen not as two competing entities but as departments of a single whole. It was not always thus, though, for the Christian church in late antiquity moved from being proscribed and persecuted to being the established religion. This week students will examine the emergence of Christendom by way of the writings of figures like Justin Martyr, Tatian, Eusebius and Augustine of Hippo.

#### Readings:

- 1) Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, in *The Church in the Roman Empire* [hereafter: *The Church in the Roman Empire*], ed. Karl F. Morrison (Chicago, 1986), pp. 7–29.
- 2) Tatian, *Address to the Greeks*, in *The Church in the Roman Empire*, pp. 29–43.
- 3) Eusebius of Caesarea, *Life of Constantine the Great*, in *The Church in the Roman Empire*, pp. 79–87.
- 4) Augustine, *The Compatibility of Church and Politics*, in idem, *Political Writings*, trans. Michael W. Tkacz and Douglas Kries, eds. Ernest Fortin and Douglas Kries (Indianapolis, 1994), pp. 202–212.
- 5) Augustine, *Letter 185: On the Correction of the Donatists*, in *The Church in the Roman Empire*, pp. 71–76.

#### WEEK 2: AUGUSTINE'S CITY OF GOD: I

The most lastingly influential medieval work of political thought was Augustine of Hippo's *City of God*, in which Augustine comprehensively and systematically spelled out the relationship of the City of Man (the earthly city) to the City of God (the heavenly city). For the next two weeks, students will read selections from Augustine's *City of God*. This week, students will focus on Books I–XIII, which contrast the two cities and which consider the nature of history.

#### Readings TBD but to include selections from:

1. Augustine, *The City of God*, in idem, *Political Writings*, trans. Michael W. Tkacz and Douglas Kries, eds. Ernest Fortin and Douglas Kries (Indianapolis, 1994), pp. 3–94.
2. Augustine, *The City of God*, in idem, *Political Writings*, trans. Tkacz and Kries, pp. 95–184.

Assignment: Reading Quiz #1

#### WEEK 3: BOETHIUS'S CONSOLATION OF PHILOSOPHY

Written in prison while Boethius awaited execution, *The Consolation of Philosophy* explored themes of fate, free will and the quest for happiness. It was widely studied and translated throughout the Middle Ages, including by Geoffrey Chaucer. This week students will read Boethius's *Consolation*, focusing particularly on the ways that he integrated classical and Christian thought and the ways that he tried to reconcile human suffering with divine providence.

Readings:

1. Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, selections.

#### WEEK 4: *BEOWULF*

This week students will read *Beowulf* to grasp how a Christianized medieval culture looked back to the heroic warrior code of the blood feud in order to move beyond it. Students will also read selections from Bede to gain a clearer sense of the context from which *Beowulf* emerged.

Readings:

Bede, *The Lives of the Abbots*, in *Medieval Europe*, pp. 18–25.

Bede, *Letter to Egbert*, in idem, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People, The Great Chronicle and Bede's Letter to Egbert*, eds. Judith McClure and Roger Collins (Oxford, 1999), pp. 343–357.

Bede, *Caedmon's Hymn*, in *Norton Anthology of English Literature: Middle Ages*, pp. 24–26.

*Beowulf*, in *Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Middle Ages*, ed. Alfred David (New York, 2000), IA: pp. 29–99.

Assignment: Reading Quiz #2

#### WEEKS 5-6: MEDIEVAL ISLAM AND JUDAISM

This week students will examine the intellectual traditions of medieval Islam and Judaism, focusing especially on the connection between faith and reason and on political thought. Students will read Alfarabi, Averroes and Maimonides, each of whom tried to reconcile Greek philosophy, particularly Aristotelian philosophy, with Islam and Judaism. These authors also played important roles transmitting Greek philosophy to the medieval West.

Readings (109 pages):

- 1) Alfarabi, *The Political Regime*, in *Medieval Political Philosophy* [hereafter: *Medieval Political Philosophy*], eds. Ralph Lerner and Muhsin Mahdi (Glencoe, IL, 1961), pp. 31–57.
- 2) Alfarabi, *The Attainment of Happiness*, in *Medieval Political Philosophy*, pp. 58–82.
- 3) Avicenna, TBD
- 4) Al-Ghazali, TBD
- 5) Averroes, *The Decisive Treatise, Determining What the Connection is Between Religion and Philosophy*
- 6) Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, in *Medieval Political Philosophy*, selections.
- 7) Saadya Gaon, TBD

Assignment: Reading Quiz #2

#### WEEK 7: THOMAS AQUINAS

Thomas Aquinas also sought to revitalize sources from classical antiquity, develop conceptions of the common good and create distinctions between human, natural and divine law. How did Aquinas synthesize the rational discourse of antiquity with revelation? This week students will read selections from Aquinas on

Christian theology, ethics and politics to see how he engaged with classical thinking and with Aristotelian philosophy in particular.

Readings:

1. Thomas Aquinas, *On Christian Theology*, in *Medieval Europe*, pp. 343–354.
2. Thomas Aquinas, selections from the *Summa Theologica*.

### **Assignment: Analytical Paper #1 Due**

#### WEEKS 8-9: DANTE'S *DIVINE COMEDY*: I

Dante Alighieri is known as the 'father of the Italian language', for having written in the Tuscan vernacular of his day rather than in Latin. His greatest work, and one of the greatest works of Western literature, is the *Divine Comedy*. This week students will read *The Inferno*, in which Dante starts on his journey, guided by the Latin poet Virgil.

Readings:

Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, Inferno.

Assignment: Reading Quiz #3

#### WEEK 10: THE BABYLONIAN CAPTIVITY AND THE GREAT SCHISM

The medieval church experienced great political conflicts regarding the authority of the pope over kings. The greatest of these conflicts occurred between Pope Boniface VIII and King Philip I of France in the thirteenth century. We will read documents addressing the Babylonian Captivity of the Papacy, during which French kings controlled the papacy, and writings on the Great Schism, during which there were competing popes in Rome and Avignon. These events prefigure later debates over church authority during the sixteenth century.

Readings:

1. John of Salisbury, *Metalogion* and *Policratus*
2. Boniface VIII, *Clericis Laicos* and *Unam Sanctam*, in *Medieval Europe*, pp. 380–382
3. Dante, *On Monarchy*, in *Medieval Political Philosophy*, pp. 418–439.
4. Marsilius of Padua, *The Defender of the Peace*, in *Medieval Political Philosophy*, selections.
5. John Wyclif, *On the Duty of the King*, in *Readings in Medieval Political Theory*, selections.

#### WEEK 11: CHAUCER'S *CANTERBURY TALES*

Late medieval social mobility and the rise of the bourgeois class provided the framework for a body of literature exploring the interactions of various estates, or classes, in European life. This week students will read Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, a satirical critique of corrupt behaviors of nobles, merchants and churchmen.

Readings:

1. Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, in *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, IA: pp. 213–312.

Assignment: Reading Quiz #4

## WEEK 12: CHRISTINE DE PIZANE

Readings:

1. Christine de Pizane, *City of Ladies*, selections
2. Christine de Pizane, *Book of the Body Politic*, selections

## WEEKS 14-15: RELIGIOUS REFORM

What led to the Protestant Reformation and what were the central complaints regarding the Western Church and its practices that were expressed by early Reformation writers? This week students will read the work of that preeminent Protestant Reformer, Martin Luther. A former Augustinian monk, Luther developed distinctive views about both Christian freedom and of the relation of church to state. In particular students will grapple with the Reformation claim that no reformation of religion could take place without a transformation of the public order of the commonwealths of Christian Europe.

Readings:

1. Martin Luther, *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*, in *Three Treatises*, trans. Charles M. Jacobs (Philadelphia, 1970), selections
2. Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian* (1520), in *Three Treatises*, trans. W.A. Lambert (Philadelphia, 1970), pp. 262–316.

WEEK 15: Experiential Learning: Gaming it out

**Second paper due 4/27/2026 at 12 p.m.**

## IV. Grading Scale and Rubrics

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### Grading Scale

For information on UF's grading policies for assigning grade points, see [here](#).

A	94 – 100%		C	74 – 76%
A–	90 – 93%		C–	70 – 73%
B+	87 – 89%		D+	67 – 69%
B	84 – 86%		D	64 – 66%
B–	80 – 83%		D–	60 – 63%
C+	77 – 79%		E	<60

### Participation Rubric

<b>A</b> (90-100%)	Typically comes to class with pre-prepared questions about the readings. Engages others about ideas, respects the opinions of others and consistently elevates the level of discussion.
<b>B</b> (80-89%)	Does not always come to class with pre-prepared questions about the reading. Waits passively for others to raise interesting issues. Some in this category, while courteous and articulate, do not adequately listen to other participants or relate their comments to the direction of the conversation.
<b>C</b> (70-79%)	Attends regularly but typically is an infrequent or unwilling participant in discussion. Is only adequately prepared for discussion.
<b>D</b> (60-69%)	Fails to attend class regularly and is inadequately prepared for discussion. Is an unwilling participant in discussion.
<b>E</b> (<60%)	Attends class infrequently and is wholly unprepared for discussion. Refuses to participate in discussion.

### Examination Rubric: Essays and Short Answers

	<b>Completeness</b>	<b>Analysis</b>	<b>Evidence</b>	<b>Writing</b>
<b>A</b> (90-100%)	Shows a thorough understanding of the question. Addresses all aspects of the question completely.	Analyses, evaluates, compares and/or contrasts issues and events with depth.	Incorporates pertinent and detailed information from both class discussions and assigned readings.	Presents all information clearly and concisely, in an organized manner.

<p><b>B</b> (80-89%)</p>	<p>Presents a general understanding of the question. Completely addresses most aspects of the question or address all aspects incompletely.</p>	<p>Analyses or evaluates issues and events, but not in any depth.</p>	<p>Includes relevant facts, examples and details but does not support all aspects of the task evenly.</p>	<p>Presents information fairly and evenly and may have minor organization problems.</p>
<p><b>C</b> (70-79%)</p>	<p>Shows a limited understanding of the question. Does not address most aspects of the question.</p>	<p>Lacks analysis or evaluation of the issues and events beyond stating accurate, relevant facts.</p>	<p>Includes relevant facts, examples and details, but omits concrete examples, includes inaccurate information and/or does not support all aspects of the task.</p>	<p>Lacks focus, somewhat interfering with comprehension.</p>
<p><b>D</b> (60-69%)</p>	<p>Fails fully to answer the specific central question.</p>	<p>Lacks analysis or evaluation of the issues and events beyond stating vague, irrelevant, and/or inaccurate facts.</p>	<p>Does not incorporate information from pertinent class discussion and/or assigned readings.</p>	<p>Organizational problems prevent comprehension.</p>
<p><b>E</b> (&lt;60%)</p>	<p>Does not answer the specific central question.</p>	<p>Lacks analysis or evaluation of the issues and events.</p>	<p>Does not adduce any evidence.</p>	<p>Incomprehensible organization and prose.</p>

## Writing Rubric

	<b>Thesis and Argumentation</b>	<b>Use of Sources</b>	<b>Organization</b>	<b>Grammar, mechanics and style</b>
<b>A</b> (90-100%)	Thesis is clear, specific, and presents a thoughtful, critical, engaging, and creative interpretation. Argument fully supports the thesis both logically and thoroughly.	Primary (and secondary texts, if required) are well incorporated, utilized, and contextualized throughout.	Clear organization. Introduction provides adequate background information and ends with a thesis. Details are in logical order. Conclusion is strong and states the point of the paper.	No errors.
<b>B</b> (80-89%)	Thesis is clear and specific, but not as critical or original. Shows insight and attention to the text under consideration. May have gaps in argument's logic.	Primary (and secondary texts, if required) are incorporated but not contextualized significantly.	Clear organization. Introduction clearly states thesis, but does not provide as much background information. Details are in logical order, but may be more difficult to follow. Conclusion is recognizable and ties up almost all loose ends.	A few errors.
<b>C</b> (70-79%)	Thesis is present but not clear or specific, demonstrating a lack of critical engagement to the text. Argument is weak, missing important details or making logical leaps with little support.	Primary (and secondary texts, if required) are mostly incorporated but are not properly contextualized.	Significant lapses in organization. Introduction states thesis but does not adequately provide background information. Some details not in logical or expected order that results in a distracting read. Conclusion is recognizable but does not tie up all loose ends.	Some errors.
<b>D</b> (60-69%)	Thesis is vague and/or confused. Demonstrates a failure to understand the text. Argument lacks any logical flow and does not utilize any source material.	Primary and/or secondary texts are almost wholly absent.	Poor, hard-to-follow organization. There is no clear introduction of the main topic or thesis. There is no clear conclusion, and the paper just ends. Little or no employment of logical body paragraphs.	Many errors.
<b>E</b> (<60%)	There is neither a thesis nor any argument.	Primary and/or secondary texts are wholly absent.	The paper is wholly disorganized, lacking an introduction, conclusion or any logical coherence.	Scores of errors.

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## V. Required Policies and Helpful Guidelines

Please refer to official UF policies at: <https://go.ufl.edu/syllabuspolicies>