

Texas State University
Honors 3392–B • Fall 2003

**“Religion, Science, and the Quest for Meaning:
An Intellectual Assault on the Ineffable?”**

Dr. Christopher Frost

I. Course Overview

The scientific assault on religion accelerated in the twentieth century. As we exited this “scientific century,” a number of questions may be asked. How are we to assess the damage done to religious faith by science in general, social science in particular? Are we consigned to a choice between naive acceptance of religious tradition—with the risk of living a “healthy illusion,” versus a total rejection of any system of meaning that extends beyond confirmation of sensory experience—with the risk of living with an uneasy sense that “certainly there must be ‘more’ to life than ‘this’?” Can a person dedicated to the highest standards of intellectual truth adhere to some tradition of faith? What are the dangers inherent in religious individuals who purposely reject the intellect in matters religious? Conversely, do the many “self help” books and admonitions of the social sciences really fill the void previously filled by faith in something or someone “sacred” (literally “set apart,” i.e. something that transcends the “ordinary”)?

As a writing intensive, capstone course, “Religion, Social Science, and the Quest for Meaning” is designed to *cross traditional disciplinary boundaries*. In fact, the very nature of the questions asked presupposes the crossing of intellectual boundaries, for what discipline can claim sole proprietorship of the human quest for meaning? In crossing disciplines, students will be required to read primary source material, to analyze material critically, and to communicate their understanding both orally and in writing. The over-arching goal is to provide a context within which you can answer for yourselves such questions as the above and in which you can determine whether even to ask such questions amounts to an intellectual assault on the ineffable.

II. Objectives

A. Instructor objectives for students who complete the course include the following:

1. To encourage students to consider seriously scientific, philosophical and religious perspectives on the question of human meaning.
2. To challenge students to attempt to bridge intellectually the gap between science and religion, that is, to examine for themselves the extent to which one can synthesize the “two cultures” (C.P. Snow).
3. To question the role that the social sciences now play in helping people “make sense of” or “arrive at meaning in” their individual lives, whether that role be explicit or implicit.

4. To make the human quest for meaning concrete by delving into the experience of “flesh and blood” persons, most notably current scientific theorists, Weil and Wiesel, and by considering Robbins’ and Grimes’ fictional treatments of the topic. As part of our attempt to bridge knowledge and life, we will incorporate significant films into the course as well.
- B. Student objectives often vary considerably; please list three objectives for this course both below and in your course notebook.
- 1.
 - 2.
 - 3.

III. Instructional Material

A. Books:

Science and The Next Fifty Years edited by Brockman.

Tao Te Ching by Lao Tsu.

Simone Weil: On Religion, Politics and Society by Frost & Bell-Metereau.

Jitterbug Perfume by Robbins.

Night by Elie Wiesel.

Moral Cruelty (manuscript) by Hulsey & Frost

When Religion Becomes Evil by Kimball.

Will Epicqwest.Com: (A Medicated Memoir) by Grimes

When Neitzche Wept by Yalom.

Escape from Freedom by Fromm.

B. Films:

“Gattaca”

“The Hours”

“The Razor’s Edge”

“Hannah and her Sisters”
 “My Dinner with Andre”

IV. Course Requirements

- A. **Class Performance:** Students are expected to read all assigned material *prior* to its discussion in class, attend *every* class meeting, and *participate* in class discussions. Please read carefully “The Seminar Experience” (attached) in determining whether or not this course is a proper choice for you. The amount and range of reading is extensive, the level of critical thinking expected is demanding, and the quality of discussion sought is vigorous.
- B. **Journal:** The purpose of the journal is to promote continued thinking about topics covered in the course, especially in terms of applying what is learned to life events and integrating what is learned in this course with learning acquired elsewhere. Journal writing provides a way to continue the dialogue between student and professor.

In keeping a journal, the student writes relatively informal comments (on a regular basis) about course content—whether that content stems from course lectures, reading assignments, or groupwork. By writing about that content, and applying it within the crucible of life, the student can develop a refined understanding or perspective from which to view the human quest for meaning. Because the professor reads and responds with comments to all entries, the student gains a more individualized approach to learning.

Generally there should be a minimum of two entries for each assigned reading, one entry per seminar session, plus additional entries of the student's own choice. An entry should be at least one page long, although quality of the entry is more important than the quantity of words. These guidelines are meant as minimum standards, of course; a student is always free to exceed the recommendations. What kinds of entries are common in journals? Such entries as the following:

- a. Entries which reflect a way in which you realize what we have studied can be applied to your own life and experience, or to the lives of others.
- b. Entries in which you are able to relate information in this course to information learned from other academic disciplines.
- c. Entries that make connections between what you learn in this course and what you observe in “popular culture,” that is, movies, television shows, magazines, newspapers, etc. Feel free to photocopy such material and include it in your journal.
- d. Entries in which you identify and reason about problems or issues that are raised by your reading or in discussions.
- e. Entries in which you explore an emotional reaction that you are having to the course material, thereby clarifying what you are experiencing. For example, if you react negatively to a text reading or seminar discussion, pin down the reasons for your reaction to the extent that you are able to do so.
- f. Entries in which you recognize implications of what you have read for yourself personally or for society as a whole.
- g. Entries that ask for clarification of statements in the text, the meaning of a lecture or discussion, or the purpose of a groupwork exercise.

These descriptions are suggestive only; make the journal your own! Journal entries will be collected at the beginning of every class session and inserted into a 3-ring binder that you will bring to each class session. In other words, *you are expected to keep the journal current* throughout the semester, a task that simultaneously insures that you keep up with all assigned readings. To the extent that all seminar participants have read the material and reflected on it via journal entries, the discussion sessions should be of high caliber.

- C. **Presentation:** A formal presentation will be required of all course participants. The presentation will consist of an analysis/appraisal of one of the “primary sources” of the course; in other words, it will be your responsibility on a given day to set the stage for our seminar discussion.
- D. **Paper:** A brief paper (5-8 typewritten, double-spaced pages) will also be required. The paper should state *your* particular resolution (tentative though it may be) to issues raised in the course, and the intellectual rationale for adopting that stance. Alternatively, you may choose a different format as a culminating project (play, poetry, art, etc.). The range of options here will be discussed in class.

V. Evaluation and Grading

Evaluation in this course will be contextual; that is, the instructor will look at the pattern of your performance in all areas enumerated in Section IV above. You will have an opportunity to evaluate your own performance as part of the process. Basically, however, I assign “relative weights” as follows: Journal (30%); Presentation (20%); Paper/Project (25%); and Seminar Participation (25%).

VI. Instructor and Class Information

Office Location: Honors Office, ASB-South

Phone Number: 245-2266 (Office)
245-8145 (Direct Line/Voice Mail)

E-mail: frosty@txstate.edu

Office Hours: Mon: 2:00pm – 3:30pm
Tues: 2:00pm – 3:30pm
Wed: 2:00pm – 3:30pm

(And by Appointment)

VII. Informal Statement of Teaching Philosophy

Michael Polanyi states that “into every act of knowing there enters a tacit and passionate contribution of the person knowing what is being known.” My basic approach to teaching reflects Polanyi’s notion, that is, the fact that *all* knowers contribute to what is being known implies a *participative* style of teaching. I must be as open to new material, to learning from my students and class interactions, as I expect my students to be receptive to what I have to offer. Further, in recognizing the personal component to all knowing, I must be innovative—able to individualize instruction, to create an atmosphere of mutual trust and enthusiasm, to use a variety of teaching methods, and to engage my students with course material. Likewise, I expect my students to “enter into” the process of knowing—to think analytically, to communicate effectively, to entertain their own ideas, and to test those ideas methodically. In short, it is within the context of a meaningful relationship between teacher and student that significant learning is most likely to occur. Let us begin, together.

THE SEMINAR EXPERIENCE

As a form of educational process the seminar can be traced to German higher education, especially to Gottingen. But it was not until the early 1800s that the seminar came to America when Harvard (who else?) attempted to establish a seminar after the German pattern.

As a pedagogical device, the seminar has a checkered and controversial history. Even today the term means many different things to many different people. Some professors and students consider it to be the acme of didactic projects. Others consider it a wasteful, irrelevant device where students waste time sharing ignorances.

Since this essay is *my* notation on the seminar and is being written for participants in *my* seminars, I might as well confess my bias on the issue: I believe the seminar to be the most viable and productive form of instruction for advanced students—*once certain conditions are met*..

But first, by *seminar* I mean essentially what the dictionary means: “a small group of advanced students in a college or graduate school engaged in original research under the guidance of a professor who meets regularly with them for reports and discussions” (The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language).

Given this definition, there is surely a sense that much of our education militates against the seminar approach to learning. For a variety of reasons, our elementary schools, high schools, and colleges tend to approach the educative process in a quite different manner—more like a *spectator* style than a *participant* style. This may be one of the reasons that some students, even those in professional and graduate schools, prefer a “classroom” atmosphere where “listening to an expert” is the *modus operandi*. They prefer to receive information communicated via an authoritative—if not an authoritarian—source.

The seminar form, on the other hand, approaches learning more as a process of participation and exposure. It assumes that hearing oneself is itself a learning experience, and that hearing the responses of peers to what we say can be a way of sharpening our self-perceptions as well as a way of dealing responsibly with a particular subject matter.

But there are problems. Like any educational procedure, the seminar can falter, even fail. Certain conditions need to be met, including the following minimal ones:

1. The *climate* of the seminar needs to be such that participants feel *free* to share their ideas, questions, and resources. Fear and intimidation are the natural enemies of an authentic seminar experience.

2. Participants—students and professor—must *want* to be part of the seminar. A seminar member who doesn't really want to be present can sabotage the learning process. (The ideal seminar participant, I believe, is primarily a self-directed learner who values and uses the seminar context for the expression of his or her ideas.)

3. Seminar participants need to place high values on *responsibility* and *honesty*. The seminar is no place for a “con-person,” or for someone who simply finds it impossible to say, “I don't know.”

4. The seminar itself ought to be seen essentially as a place and process for sharing intellectual matters. Although the human qualities of participants enhance the seminar, the setting is not a group therapy setting or a sensitivity training – personal growth group. Although human qualities are integral to the process, the intellectual factor must retain its priority.

Because a true seminar is *relational*, each seminar evolves its own personality and style, bringing together many factors and forces beyond those listed above. That is why a seminar is always something of an adventure, with *surprise* and *uncertainty* inevitable (and we know that not everyone likes surprises and uncertainties!).

So, how about *you*? Are you ready for the seminar experience?

© Christopher Frost, frosty@txstate.edu, 2/24/2003