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 an Honors Course, “Religion, 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—and to do so within the rich cultural and intellectual context of Oxford. 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.

In this Oxford (Study Abroad) setting, we will move well beyond attempts to “explain” the process of making meaning; rather, we will read, talk, watch films and take trips that are, in themselves, an attempt to make meaning, of life, of tragedy, of love, of what it is to be human. In this way we will try to experience directly the making of meaning, a process that resides at the core of what it is to be human.
II. Student Learning 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.
   - Analyze, compare, and critique scientific, philosophical, and religious perspectives on human meaning.
   - Identify major similarities and differences in the way thinkers in scientific, philosophical and religious traditions frame questions of human meaning.
   - Explore points of overlap and conflict between scientific and religious attitudes on nature (relationship between nature and personal 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).
   - Contrast the scientific and religious “ways of knowing” (epistemologies), and assess the extent to which these variant ways of knowing “converge,” or inherently “diverge.”
   - Formulate a personal synthesis that addresses or explores apparent gaps between scientific and religious perspectives and communicate this synthesis through written or artistic expressions.

3. To question the role that the sciences and 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.
   - Describe systems of practice (e.g., prayer, mediation, reflection, scriptural interpretation, service) that appear to promote or enhance experiences conducive to personal meaning making.
   - Reflect on ways in which you construct and communicate “meaning” to others, paying special attention to language (literal, metaphoric, etc.)
   - Identify similarities and differences between empirical and spiritual systems for conveying meaning.

4. To make the human quest for meaning concrete by delving into the experience of “flesh and blood” persons, most notably Weil, Wiesel, Dawkins, Lewis, and Freud, and by considering Robbins’ fictional treatment of the topic.
   - Explore the experiences of seminal figures (both real and fictional) who rely on scientific, religious, and/or philosophic systems as the foundation upon which to build their personal structure of meaning.
   - Analyze the antecedents in the lives of seminal figures that appear to have contributed to the assumptions, problems, challenges, and resolution of their personal quest for meaning.

5. To encourage students to consider seriously the life and work of two seminal thinkers, in particular: Sigmund Freud and C.S. Lewis.
Analyze, compare, and critique the contributions that each has made to how we understand ourselves and our place in the universe.
Identify major similarities and differences in the way these two thinkers frame questions and explore answers on such seminal topics as joy, happiness, sexuality, loss, death, meaning and the question of God.

6. To examine the Freudian (“scientific”) claim that belief is an inevitable (but unfortunate) byproduct of our psychological development.
   - Contrast Freud’s psychological explanation of our need to believe in a god with Lewis’s spiritual explanation.
   - Formulate a response (pro or con) to Freud’s claim that belief in the supernatural has its roots in our fear of death and need to feel protected by a powerful “father.”

7. To articulate C. S. Lewis’s key arguments for the existence of God and what he called “The Tao.”
   a. Contrast and contrast Lewis’s emphasis on the role and function of theology to the role and function of science (with special attention to Freud).
   - Describe the role of myth in C. S. Lewis’s journey from Christian to atheist to deist to Christian during the course of his lifetime.

8. To encourage students to begin to position themselves within the Religion-Science and Freud-Lewis debate.

B. Student learning objectives often vary considerably; please list three objectives for this course both below and in your course journal. In other words, after taking this course, what do you hope to have accomplished?

1.

2.

3.
III. Instructional Material

A. Books:

*Tao Te Ching*, by Lao Tsu *Stephen Mitchell* version suggested, not required.
*The Abolition of Man*, by C.S. Lewis.
*Civilization and its Discontents*, by S. Freud.
*When God is Gone, Everything is Holy*, by Chet Raymo.

B. Media (Films):

“Gattaca”
“Baraka”
“My Dinner with André”
“Shadowlands”
“Hannah & Her Sisters”
“The Hours”

C. Connections to:

Course: “The Quest for Meaning in Life, Literature and Art” & “C.S. Lewis”
Readings: Selected Essays on the Relationship between Science & Religion
Excursions: in Oxford, London, Stonehenge, etc.

IV. Course Requirements

A. **Class Participation:** 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. Of course, these attributes are in direct alignment with the expectations and standards of Oxford University.

B. **Journal:** The purpose of the intellectual 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 in your other Oxford course, excursions, daily conversations, and the like. Journal writing also provides a way to continue the dialogue between student and professor.

In keeping a journal, the student writes relatively informal, but reflective, comments (daily) about course content—whether from course discussions, reading, groupwork, films or excursions. 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. And because the professor reads and responds to the entries, the student gains a more individualized approach to learning.
Generally there should be a minimum of two pages or so (assuming 12-point font) for each assigned reading or seminar session, plus additional entries of the student’s own choice. Although an entry should be at least one-to-two pages long, quality of the entry (thinking/reflection/probing) is more important than the quantity of words. These guidelines are meant as minimum standards, of course; a student is always free (encouraged) to exceed the recommendations. Do note that, in the Oxford setting, access to computers and printers is limited; therefore, you may hand write your entries, but please do so in a manner that can be easily read.

What kinds of entries are common in journals? Such entries as the following:

- **a.** Entries in which you apply course readings, discussions, and insights to your own life and experience, or to the lives of others.
- **b.** Entries in which you 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. (You may even think of the journal as an “intellectual scrapbook,” and include photos, drawings, clippings, and the like.)
- **d.** Entries in which you identify and reason (in greater depth) 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 may be collected at the beginning of every class session, to verify that you are keeping up; you are expected to keep the journal current throughout the course, a task that simultaneously ensures 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 (a team of two students, actually) on a given day to set the stage for our seminar discussion.

**D. Paper/Project:** A culminating paper or project will also be required. The paper or project should explore your particular resolution (tentative though it may be) to issues raised in the course (see: student learning objectives) and the intellectual rationale for adopting that stance. The paper/project will serve as your “final examination.”
Unlike traditional research papers, we do not want you to start on the culminating project early in the course. Instead, this paper/project is meant to “tie together” all of our course discussions, readings, and debates, so you will want to “hear everyone out” before completing it. Details regarding what we mean by a “project” (in lieu of a paper) will be discussed in class.

V. Evaluation and Grading

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

VI. 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.” Our 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. We must be as open to new material, to learning from our students and class interactions, as we expect our students to be receptive to what we have to offer. Further, in recognizing the personal component to all knowing, we 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 our students with course material. Likewise, we expect our 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 teachers and students that significant learning is most likely to occur. Let us begin, together.
VII. 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?