The key question about religion today is: can all religious experiences and practices effectively be contained within this dimension of the conjunction of truth and meaning? The best starting point for such a line of inquiry is the point at which religion itself faces a trauma, a shock which dissolves the link between truth and meaning, a truth so traumatic that it resists being integrated into the universe of meaning. Every theologian sooner or later faces the problem of how to reconcile the existence of God with the fact of *shoah* or similar excessive evil: how are we to reconcile the existence of an omnipotent and good God with the terrifying suffering of millions of innocents, like children killed in the gas chambers? Surprisingly (or not), the theological answers build a strange succession of Hegelian triads. First, those who want to leave divine sovereignty unimpaired and thus have to attribute to God full responsibility for *shoah*, first offer (1) the “legalistic” sin-and-punishment theory (*shoah* has to be a punishment for the past sins of humanity – or Jews themselves); then, they pass to (2) the “moralistic” character-education theory (*shoah* is to be understood along the lines of the story of Job, as the most radical test of our faith in God – if we survive this ordeal, our character will stand firm…); and, finally, they take refuge in a kind of “infinite judgment” which should save the day after all common measure between *shoah* and its meaning breaks down, (3) the divine mystery theory (facts like *shoah* bear witness to the unfathomable abyss of divine will). In accordance with the Hegelian motto of a redoubled mystery (the mystery God is for us has to be also a mystery for God Himself), the truth of this “infinite judgment” can only be to deny God’s full sovereignty and omnipotence. The next triad is thus composed of those who, unable to combine *shoah* with God’s omnipotence (how could He have allowed it to happen?), opt for some form of divine limitation: (1) first, God is directly posited as finite or, at least, contained, not omnipotent, not all-encompassing: he finds himself overwhelmed by the dense inertia of his own creation; (2) then, this limitation is reflected back into God himself as his free act: God is self-limited, He voluntarily constrained his power in order to leave the space open for human freedom, so it is us, humans, who are fully responsible for the evil in the world – in short, phenomena like *shoah* are the ultimate price we have to pay for the divine gift of freedom; (3) finally, self-limitation is externalized, the two moments are posited as autonomous - God is embattled, there is a counter-force or principle of demoniac Evil active in the world (the dualistic solution).

--Slavoj Žižek, “Only a Suffering God Can Save Us”
Course Description:

This course will examine Slavoj Žižek’s theoretical writings and commentaries on the fields of religious studies, philosophy, and critical/literary theory.

Slavoj Žižek is a major contemporary philosopher whose books, essays, films, and talks are at the forefront of today’s debates in critical/literary theory, political theology, political philosophy, and film studies. His work is informed by two major traditions, psychoanalysis (Jacques Lacan) and Marxism. In addition, Žižek’s scholarship is heavily indebted to the philosophy of G.W.F. Hegel and the German Idealist tradition. Žižek’s “objects of study” cover a wide expanse of disciplinary contexts. For instance, Žižek’s writings often reference works of modern literature (Franz Kafka) as well as events and topics relating to popular culture, continental philosophy, religion, political philosophy, psychoanalysis, and film.

REL 392: Žižek and Religion will examine Žižek’s various critiques of “religion” and his commentaries on specific religious traditions, namely Christianity. The course will begin with a general introduction to Žižek’s major ideas on religion and religious theory. This will lead to a discussion of his place within contemporary philosophy, especially his connection to Lacanian psychoanalysis and Marxism.

The Žižekian texts that will be reading cover a range of topics. The Žižek Reader contains selections from his work on culture, gender studies, and philosophy. His book Violence addresses the previous listed areas and includes discussions of religion. The Monstrosity of Christ is Žižek’s most focused study of religion and, more specifically, Christianity to date. These works along with articles, films, and video recordings of Žižek’s talks will provide us with a rich resource to examine and explore his thinking on religion, philosophy, critical/literary theory, and a range of other related contexts.

Texts:

The Žižek Reader, E. Wright and E. Wright eds.

Violence, S. Žižek.

The Monstrosity of Christ, S. Žižek, J. Milbank, and C. Davis.

Online texts and videos and film.

Course Goals:

- Be able to identify and understand key critical terms and concepts in the selected writings of Slavoj Žižek.
- Be able to identify and understand key arguments in the selected writings of Slavoj Žižek.
- Be able to conduct research in the area of religion and Žižek studies.
- Be able to form critical responses (written and oral) to issues relating to religion and Žižek’s selected writings.
Grading:
The *final grade in this course will be based on work submitted in the form of a “portfolio.” The portfolio shall contain (1) exploratory writings, (2) critical essays (2), and a final summary essay written during the final exam period.

Exploratory writings  40 pts.
Critical essays       50 pts.  > 100 pts.
Summary essay        10 pts.

Notices:
*Unexcused absences will result in one (1) point per missed class being deducted from the final grade.

*SECTION 504 OF THE REHABILITATION ACT OF 1973: Any student in need of special consideration should make an appointment to see me during office hours.

*All assignments must meet the requirements of effective communication set forth in the Handbook.

*See guidelines addendum.

*This syllabus is augmented by and in compliance with the College catalog.

Schedule:
1.19  Introduction.
1.24  Who is Slavoj Žižek?
1.26  Žižek Reader, 1-8 and video.
1.31  Žižek Reader, “The Undergrowth of Enjoyment,” 12-36.
2.2   Discussion and video.
2.7   Žižek Reader, “The Obscene Object of Postmodernity,” 37-52.
2.9   Discussion and video.
2.16  Discussion and video.
2.21  Discussion and Kung Fu Panda II.
2.23 Violence.

3.6 Discussion and Hitchcock’s The Birds.

3.8 Discussion and Hitchcock’s Psycho.

3.13 Discussion and Lynch’s Blue Velvet.


3.20 Discussion.


3.27 Discussion.

3.29 Discussion.

4.3 Discussion and Thomas J.J. Altizer/Žižek video.

4.5 Discussion.


4.12 Discussion and the concept of Christian atheism.

4.17 Discussion.

4.19 Discussion and excerpt from Paul’s New Moment.


4.26 Discussion.

5.1 Discussion and video.

5.3 Closing.