

An Inquiry into the Good: Exploring the Boundaries of Philosophy, Politics & Religion



HUMN 301 • Section 01 • CRN: 54776 • Comparative Humanities
Spring 2011 • TR 2:30–3:52 pm • MCDL 242

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Office hours: W 10:00–12:00, or by appointment • Marts 3C

Questions concerning the “good life” for human beings, or simply the “good” as an abstract ideal, have been at the center of world philosophy and religion since the time of the ancient Greek, Indian and Chinese civilizations. While many religious traditions in Asia and the West developed sophisticated concepts of salvation and the afterlife, they also concerned themselves with concrete and practical issues of human community, raising questions and encountering problems that we normally consider philosophical, ethical or political. It is easy, but too simplistic, to separate and subordinate the social ideas (and ideals) of religious traditions from their doctrinal beliefs or ritual practices. Indeed, in order to survive, religions must have some sort of “plan” for human flourishing in this world.

This seminar is dedicated to an analysis of the various forms such “plans” for human flourishing—both personal and communal—may take. Through the use of a number of case studies, we will focus attention on the way that philosophers and religious figures of the West and Asia have conceptualized the “good” in textual and visual form from ancient times to the present. Along the way, we will examine the disciplinary, conceptual and practical boundaries of the categories “philosophy,” “politics” and “religion.” Case studies will include the Kyoto School, an early twentieth century movement in Japanese thought whose members variously conceptualized and negotiated a merger of traditional Asian religious perspectives and modern Western philosophy, and Liberation Theology, a broad-based activist movement blending Christianity and Marxism that first emerged in Latin America in the 1960s. Themes include: philosophy and/as religion; politics and/as religion; secular vs. sacred; individual vs. communal salvation; religion and/as revolution; and the quest for Utopia.

The primary objective of this seminar is to have students explore in a critical and informed fashion the disciplinary, conceptual and practical boundaries of philosophy, politics and religion through a sustained analysis of various programs for human flourishing. This will be accomplished through case studies of several historically significant movements that consciously or subconsciously blur the lines between these categories in the quest for a more complete understanding of the “good life” in individual and communal terms.

Readings:

All readings can be found as pdf files on Moodle; there are no texts in this course!

COURSE REQUIREMENTS:

1. ATTENDANCE

Attendance is mandatory. Since this course requires significant student interaction and discussion, it is absolutely necessary for you to attend each and every class. Only sickness with a note is considered a valid excuse. Each absence without excuse will result in a 2-point deduction from the participation grade. Being late without an excuse will count as half an absence, thus a 1-point deduction. Five absences without a note will result in automatic failure.

2. PARTICIPATION

30%

Class participation, including discussion of readings and questions posed in class and on Moodle, is a requirement. Participation is a matter of quality not quantity. You do not have to speak every class, but rather show that you have done the readings and are willing and able to engage, in a thoughtful way, with the topics under discussion. Good questions are also an important aspect of participation (see next requirement).

3. READING QUESTIONS (RQs)

10%

For each and every reading, all students will be asked to submit at least one question for discussion. Questions must be submitted by midnight on the evening before the class in which the reading will be discussed. The instructor will choose the best questions and we will use these as a basis for class discussion. At the end of the term, each student will be evaluated on the basis of how many of their questions were chosen for use in class.

3. ENGAGEMENT PIECES (EPs)

10% x 3 = 30%

A large part of this course will be devoted to writing, understood as a *process* rather than simply a *means* of communication. In order to achieve this, we will be employing methods of *exploratory* writing, i.e., writing that is itself part of the process of developing one's thoughts and arguments. Each student will be required to write a total of three 1500-word "engagement pieces," in response to a major issue or question raised in the lectures or the readings. These pieces will take a variety of forms, and each will have its own specific requirements. Generally, the EPs will be graded in terms of the student's ability to critically engage with a specific text, issue or question (note: critically does not mean "negatively"). Any opinion or idea is valid, providing you can back it up evidentially (or, failing that, rhetorically). You will have the opportunity to hand in drafts of your work, and will receive written and oral feedback. As the term progresses, evaluation of the EPs will become more demanding.

4. FINAL TAKE HOME EXAM

30%

Final take home exam, to be assigned on the last day of class. You will have one week to complete the exam. All questions will be in essay format, and you will have some choice.

CONTRACTUAL OBLIGATIONS (the fine print):

- All written work is to be submitted electronically as an MS Word file with a ".doc" or ".docx" suffix and your last name in the filename; e.g., Smith-EP1(d) ['d' for draft; 'f' for final version]. This is for two reasons: 1) my comments will be much more legible if I type them; and 2) once or twice in the semester I will submit your work to Turnitin.com to check for academic dishonesty. If you hand in work that is not your own, expect my best effort to have you disciplined to the fullest extent possible.
- Note taking on laptops is NOT permitted. Cell phones are to be turned off BEFORE EACH CLASS.
- Extensions for the essay will be readily granted, provided that you ask me *at least a week in advance*. After that point, they will be granted *very* selectively, usually only for medical reasons.

SCHEDULE OF TOPICS & READINGS

I. Considering the Good (Life)

Wk 1	1/20	Course Introduction	
Wk 2	1/25–1/27	Western Approaches to the Good Life I	Murdoch & Plato
Wk 3	2/1–2/3*	Western Approaches to the Good Life II	MacIntyre & Aristotle
Wk 4	2/8–2/10 [§]	Buddhist Approaches to the Good Life I	Keown, Siderits, <i>Dhammapada</i>
Wk 5	2/15–2/17 [†]	Buddhist Approaches to the Good Life II	Harvey, Kraft, Sivaraksa

II. Religion and/as Politics

Wk 6	2/22–2/24*	Religion and Politics in China & Japan	Ashiwa, Shields
Wk 7	3/1–3/3 [§]	Religion & Democracy I	Buruma 1, Buruma 3
Wk 8	3/8–3/10 [†]	Religion & Democracy II	Buruma 3, Yu
Wk 9	3/15–3/17	SPRING BREAK	
Wk 10	3/22–3/24*	Islam, Politics & Justice I	Ismael & Ismael
Wk 11	3/29–3/31 [§]	Islam, Politics & Justice II	Khomeini, Gaddafi
Wk 12	4/5–4/7 [†]	Liberation Theology I	Bonino 1, Bonino 2
Wk 13	4/12–4/14	Liberation Theology II	Cone

III. Religion and/as Personal Transformation

Wk 14	4/19–4/21	Kyoto School I	Nishida 1, Nishida 2
Wk 15	4/26–4/28 ^{THX}	Kyoto School II	Nishitani, Tanabe

CODE: * = EP ASSIGNED § = EP DRAFT DUE † = EP FINAL DUE THX = TAKE HOME EXAM ASSIGNED

You'll be willing to say, I think, that the sun not only provides visible things with the power to be seen but also with coming to be, growth, and nourishment, although it is not itself coming to be.—How could it be?—Therefore, you should also say that not only do the objects of knowledge owe their being known to the good, but their being is also due to it, although the good is not being, but superior to it in rank and power.
— Plato, *The Republic*

*True religion is not a narrow dogma. It is not external observance. It is faith in God and living in the presence of God. It means faith in a future life, in truth and Ahimsa....
Religion is a matter of the heart. No physical inconvenience can warrant abandonment of one's own religion.*
— Mahatma Gandhi

GRADING POLICIES

In grading all written assignments I ask the following questions:

1. Does the paper have a thesis?
2. Is the thesis interesting / relevant to the course?
3. Is the paper free from long quotations / excessive borrowing of ideas?
4. Is the paper reasonably well written (i.e., sentence structure, grammar, spelling)?
5. Is it long enough / not too long?

If the answer to any of the above is 'no', the paper will receive a 'C' grade of some form. If the answer to more than two of the above is 'no', the paper will receive a 'D' grade. If all of the above are answered by 'yes', the following additional questions apply:

6. How thoughtful / original is the paper?
7. How well organized is the paper? Does it have a conclusion?
8. Is the style efficient, not wordy or unclear?
9. Does the writing betray any special elegance?
10. Does the paper go 'beyond' the course material to explore other possibilities?

Depending on the answers to these questions, the paper will receive some form of A or B grade.

Grading for the Take Home Exam will be based on your knowledge of the material, as well as your ability to clearly and succinctly respond to significant issues and problems raised in the course.

How to do well in this course? Here are some general tips:

- Sleep 7 hours per night, and eat breakfast; be energetic and enthusiastic, even if it requires espresso;
- Attend every class without exception, or let me know well in advance if you do need to miss a class;
- Read the material prior to each class, and make notes on the reading(s), including questions or points that intrigue, fascinate, confuse or repulse you (or any combination of the four);
- Try to relate the material to other topics discussed in the course;
- Bring your questions and comments to class and be prepared to speak;
- Be willing to engage with others, the instructor and guest lecturers, in a thoughtful and polite fashion;
- Talk about the class outside of class with others, whenever you have the chance;
- Write well; take into account my comments on your drafts; get help if you need it;
- Be nice to me (I like dark chocolate – anything 85% proof or higher).

When it comes down to it, there is absolutely no reason for anybody to get a grade lower than B– in this class. The only way you can get a C, D or F is if you fail to attend and/or do not do the work. Having said that, it is also very difficult to get an 'A' grade (95%+) in this course; to do so, you will need to: a) show consistent excellence in all of your work—both written and oral; and b) go above and beyond the expectations of the course, which may require taking creative risks.

GRADING RUBRIC:	95–100%	=	A	4.00	Near Perfect!
	89–94%	=	A-	3.67	Excellent
	83–88%	=	B+	3.33	Very Good
	77–82%	=	B	3.00	Good
	71–76%	=	B-	2.67	Average
	65–70%	=	C+	2.33	Below Average
	59–64%	=	C	2.00	Barely Acceptable
	53–58%	=	C-	1.50	Not Good
	47–52%	=	D	1.00	Poor
	0–46%	=	F	0.00	Not Acceptable

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ENGAGEMENT PIECE #1

Assigned: Thursday, February 3 @ 2:30 pm
Draft Due: Thursday, February 10 @ 5:00 pm
Final Due: Thursday, February 17 @ 5:00 pm
Length: 1500 words, single-spaced, reasonable font-size (11-12)
Submission: As Word document, uploaded to Moodle
Worth: 10% of final grade

A large part of this course will be devoted to writing, understood as a *process* rather than simply a *means* of communication. In order to achieve this, we will be employing methods of *exploratory* writing, i.e., writing that is itself part of the process of developing one's thoughts and arguments. Each student will be required to write a total of three 1500-word "engagement pieces," in response to a major issue or question raised in the lectures or the readings. These pieces will take a variety of forms, and each will have its own specific requirements. Generally, the EPs will be graded in terms of the student's ability to critically engage with a specific text, issue or question (note: critically does not mean "negatively"). Any opinion or idea is valid, providing you can back it up evidentially (or, failing that, rhetorically). You will have the opportunity to hand in drafts of your work, and will receive written and oral feedback. As the term progresses, evaluation of the EPs will become more demanding.

ASSIGNMENT

In this first assignment, I would like you to compare and contrast AT LEAST TWO specific aspects of Christian and Buddhist ethics, as discussed in the readings by MacIntyre (MacIntyre2 & MacIntyre3) and Keown, and exemplified in the *Dhamapada*, *Vessantara Jataka* and the *Sermon on the Mount*. You should also consider points of similarity or contrast with the ethical theories of Plato/Murdoch and Aristotle/MacIntyre that we have discussed in some detail. Be sure to focus in on specific passages to make your points (though do not over-quote). Any and all references should be made in-text (e.g., MacIntyre3, 167). There is no need for a bibliography (or title page). There is no need to use outside sources (in fact this is discouraged). I DO want you to develop an argument or idea. DO NOT simply summarize the readings. Finally, in this and all your EPs, you should feel free to comment personally on the issues, but make sure what you say is a) relevant; b) backed up by evidence, logic, or sound rhetoric.

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ENGAGEMENT PIECE #2

Assigned: Friday, March 4 @ 2:30 pm
Draft Due: Friday, March 18 @ 5:00 pm
Final Due: Friday, March 25 @ 5:00 pm
Length: 1500 words, single-spaced, reasonable font-size (11-12)
Submission: As Word document, uploaded to Moodle
Worth: 10% of final grade

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ASSIGNMENT

In this second assignment, I would like you to develop your own argument in response to the following question: *Are religion, democracy and human rights compatible?* I know this sounds very general, but I want you to base your argument on a few specific points, gleaned from the readings from Weeks 7 and 8 (including the three chapters in Buruma and the one by Yu), but also, if you so choose, from our earlier work on Christianity, Buddhism, China and Japan. Here's the kicker: *I want you to develop an argument that is against what you actually believe.* Thus, if you believe that they are compatible (as I suspect most of you do), then argue the opposite. You might think this odd, but I assure you it's a very good practice. Finally, in this and all your EPs, you should feel free to comment personally on the issues, but make sure what you say is a) relevant; b) backed up by evidence, logic, or sound rhetoric.

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ENGAGEMENT PIECE #3

Assigned: Thursday, March 30 @ 2:30 pm
Draft Due: Thursday, April 7 @ 5:00 pm
Final Due: Thursday, April 14 @ 5:00 pm
Length: 1500 words, single-spaced, reasonable font-size (11-12)
Submission: As Word document, uploaded to Moodle
Worth: 10% of final grade

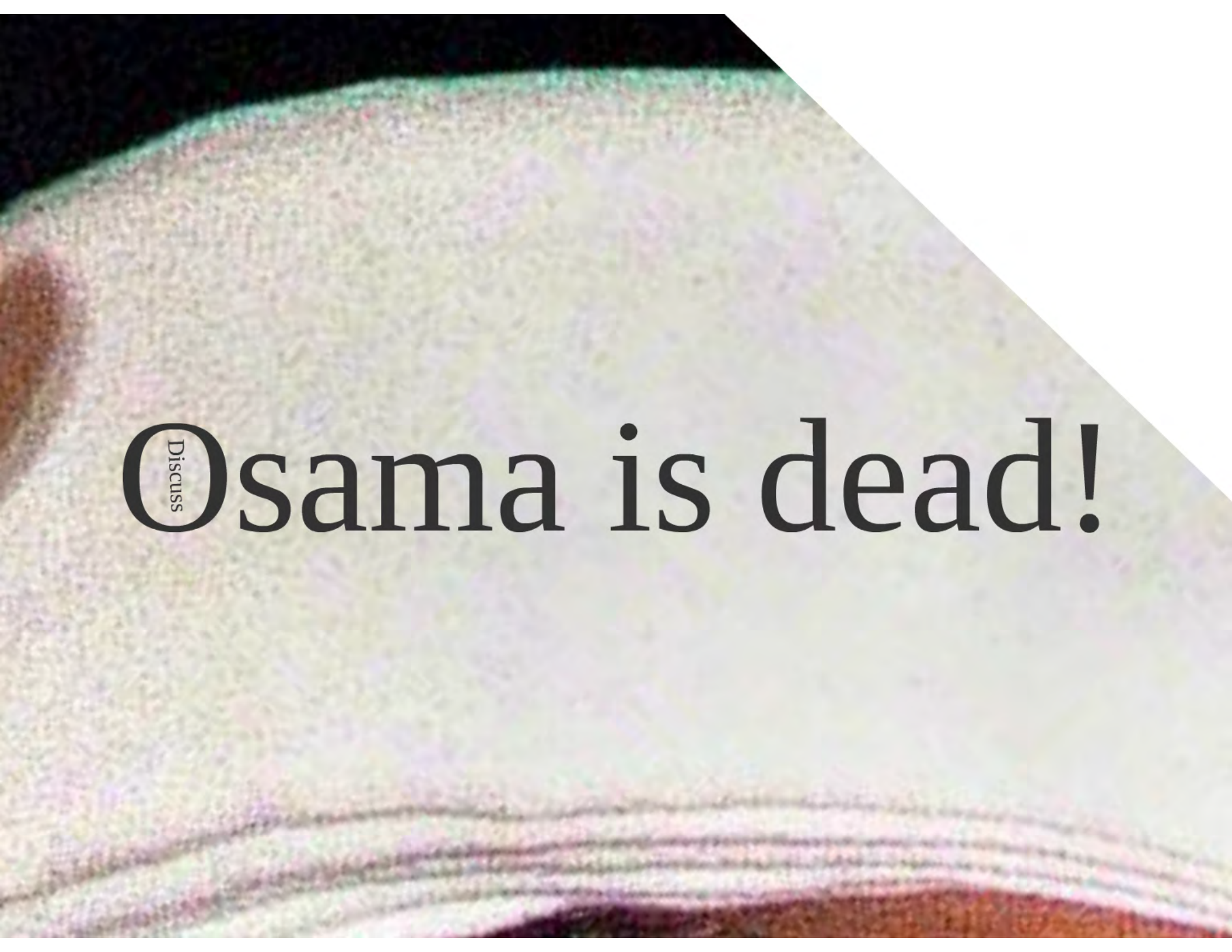
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ASSIGNMENT

For this third and final engagement piece, we're going to experiment a little. I would like you to write a fictional dialogue between two or three characters, on the issue of 'religious revolution'. This is a topic that encompasses our readings and discussions of Islamic political theory, (Khomeini & Gaddafi), liberation theology (our next topic), as well as some of our past discussions of the Marxist critique of religion and religion in China (and my talk on radical Buddhism). You can (and perhaps should) narrow the discussion to more specific topics such as the role of religious ideas in social or political transformation, the quest for a (religious) utopia, and you should reflect on some of the positive and negative aspects of using religion to overhaul human life at the communal level. Your speakers should not be 'actual' people (Khomeini, Jesus, etc.), and should probably not adhere to a single tradition (i.e., a 'Buddhist' vs. a 'Christian' etc). Try to make the conversation 'realistic' and the characters believable, but also passionate and combative (as conversations about religion and radical politics usually are). Have fun!

Osama is dead!





Discuss Osama is dead!

Discuss