

The College of the Humanities
Seminar HUMS 4903B/RELI 4850B/5850B
Hermeneutics: Interpreting Texts

Thursdays 11:35 – 2:25

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Office Hours: Thursdays 3:00 – 4:30 pm (or by appointment)

“Interpretation would be impossible if [past] expressions of life were completely strange. It would be unnecessary if nothing strange were in them. It lies, therefore, in between these two extremes.”
Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911)¹

“If I were asked to define liberal education while standing on one leg, my answer would be that it is *training in argument about interpretations*.” (emphasis in original)
Jonathan Z. Smith (1938-2017)²

“The world is not given; it is not simply “there”. We constitute it by acts of interpretation. We constitute it by activities of speech and memory and judgement. It is by an act of human will, through projects of language and history, through words and memory, that we fabricate the world and ourselves. But there is this double sense to the word fabrication. It means both to build and to lie.” Jonathan Z. Smith (1938-2017)³

Course Description:

Large-scale religious traditions generally rely on texts regarded as sacred scripture. But how are we to understand what these texts mean? This seminar examines modes of understanding internal to religious traditions (both Western and Asian) while also examining philosophical thinking concerned with the whole question of interpretation (hermeneutics) extending beyond religion to include literary theory. Our purview extends to texts of that broader canon referred to as “Great Books” and may extend to works of visual art or symbolism. We will be guided by a rubric of did, has, and could. What *did* the text mean originally in the intent of its original composers? What *has* the text meant according to commentators over its history of reception? Finally,

¹ *Gesammelte Schriften* (Stuttgart, 1926, rp. 1958), Vol. VII, p. 255. Translated in H.P. Rickman, *Pattern and Meaning in History: Thoughts on History and Society by Wilhelm Dilthey* (New York, 1962), p. 77. Cited in J.Z. Smith, *Map is not Territory*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978, p. 242.

² Jonathan Z. Smith, “The Introductory Course: Less is Better,” in *Teaching the Introductory Course in Religious Studies: A Sourcebook*. ed. Mark Juergensmeyer. Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1991, p. 188.

³ Jonathan Z. Smith, *On Teaching Religion*. New York: OUP, 2013, p. 125.

what *could* the text mean for us today? This last question is clearly different from the previous two and is located at, or beyond in some perspectives, the frontier of scholarly endeavor. We will examine a range of case studies from a variety of traditions and historical periods and students will develop their own case study into a final presentation and paper.

Course Learning Outcomes

On successful completion of this course students should be able to:

- Distinguish historical critical from pre-modern and theological approaches to texts
- Have a broad understanding of biblical and general (philosophical) hermeneutics
- Apply the ancient “four senses of scripture” as a useful heuristic and typology for looking at a variety of religious and literary works
- Communicate more effectively in group discussion, individual presentations, and written academic papers
- Distinguish the nature and methodologies of the humanities from those of the natural sciences
- Reflect intelligently on the processes of understanding that provide humanity with meaning

Course Evaluation

- Participation/attendance: 20%
In a seminar course, attendance and *active* participation constitute the *sine qua non* of successful completion. We are all learning together through dialogue and so to not be there is, effectively, to not do the seminar. More than three absences without documented reasons means one cannot get credit for the course.
- “Executive summaries” or “briefing notes” on weekly readings. There are ten weeks with assigned readings in the semester. There are two options here: Option 1: Upload *before* the class, a one-page (single-spaced) summary of the readings for each of these weeks. Option 2: Upload a 2-3 page summary on any 5 (five) of these weeks. For option 1, each summary is worth one point. For option 2, each is worth two points. In either case, their value is reduced by 50% if they are submitted after the particular class instead of before it. Either way, five *must* be submitted to get course credit. 10%
- Three-page interpretive analysis of a favourite song, poem, painting, or passage: 5%
due Jan. 25
- Leading discussion of an assigned reading in the course once in the semester: 5%
- Proposal, draft description, and initial bibliography of your case study paper: 10%
Due Feb. 15
- In-seminar presentation of your case study: 10%

- Final submitted paper: 20% due April 8
- Take-home examination: 20% due, at the latest, April 25

Note: all components above must be submitted to get course credit

Required Text:

Jens Zimmermann, *Hermeneutics: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press, 2015.
Available at Singing Pebble Books, 206 Main St., Ottawa. <https://www.singingpebblebooks.ca/>

Price: \$13.50 at Singing Pebble or Amazon

All other readings are available through ARES or on our Brightspace page.

SCHEDULE

[Please note: this may be somewhat malleable in terms of availability of guest speakers and class pace and interests]

Week 1 - Thur. Jan. 9

Course Introduction and participant introductions

(Please read before our first class)

Noel Salmond, “Notes on the Problem of Interpretation” and my College of the Humanities newsletter report on this seminar

Week 2 - Thur. Jan. 16

Same myth, multiple meanings

Zimmermann, ch. 1 “What is hermeneutics?”

Elli Maranda, “Five Interpretations of a Melanesian Myth,” *The Journal of American Folklore*, 88, no. 339 (Jan.-Mar 1973): 3-13.

Week 3 - Thur. Jan. 23

Hermeneutics, the Bible, and religion

Zimmermann, ch. 5, “Hermeneutics and theology”

James Kugel, “The Rise of Modern Biblical Scholarship,” ch. 1 in *How to Read the Bible*, 1-46.
New York: Simon and Schuster, 2007.

(*Interpretive analysis due*)

Week 4 - Thur. Jan. 30

Medieval hermeneutics: The four senses of scripture

Michael Fishbane, “The Teacher and the Hermeneutical Task: A Reinterpretation of Medieval Exegesis.” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, XLIII, no. 4 (December 1975): 709-722.

David C. Steinmetz, “The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis.” In *The Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, edited by Stephen, E. Fowl, 26-38. Oxford: Blackwell, 1997.

Week 5 - Thur. Feb. 6

Case Study: The Song of Songs

The Song of Songs (preferably in annotated NRSV)

Ilana Pardes, “The Rise of Allegory: From Rabbi Akiva to Origen.” ch. 1 in *The Song of Songs: A Biography*, 22-58. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019.

Week 6 - Thur. Feb. 13

Case Study: Interpreting the Bhagavad-Gita in the Twentieth Century: Gandhi, Godse, and Ambedkar

Bhagavad-Gita (preferably in the Barbara Stoler Miller translation)

J.T.F. Jordens, “Gandhi and the Bhagavadgita.” In *Modern Indian Interpreters of the Bhagavadgita*, edited by Robert Minor, 88-109. Albany: SUNY Press, 1986.

Dorothy Figueira, “Ambedkar’s Counter-Revolutionary Gītā.” ch. 7 in *The Afterlives of the Bhagavad Gītā: Readings in Translation*, 174-199. Oxford: OUP, 2023.

(Paper proposal, short draft, and bibliography due Feb. 16)

Week 7 - Thur. Feb. 20

BREAK

Week 8 - Thur. Feb. 27

The birth of philosophical hermeneutics: Schleiermacher to Gadamer

Zimmermann, ch. 2 “Hermeneutics a brief history”, ch. 3, “Philosophical hermeneutics”

Hans-Georg Gadamer, “The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem” in *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, translated and edited by David E. Linge, 3-17. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976.

Week 9 - Thur. Mar. 7
Bultmann and Ricoeur

Rudolf Bultmann, "Is Exegesis without Presuppositions Possible?" In Rudolf Bultmann, *Existence and Faith*, 289-96. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1961.

Paul Ricoeur, TBA

Week 10 - Thur. Mar. 13
Case Study in Hermeneutics and the Law: Originalism

Zimmermann, ch. 6, "Hermeneutics and law"

Antonin Scalia, "E Pluribus Unum: Constitutional Interpretation and Federalism." In *Holy Writ: Interpretation in Law and Religion*, edited by Arie-Jan Kwak, 9-14. Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2009.

Harry Litman, "Originalism, Divided." *The Atlantic* May 25, 2021.

Week 11 - Thur. Mar. 20
Case Study: Freud and the Interpretation of Dreams

Sigmund Freud, "The Method of Interpreting Dreams." ch. 2 in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, translated by Joyce Crick, 78-97. Oxford: Oxford World Classics, 2008.

Barbara Tedlock, "The New Anthropology of Dreaming." In *Dreams: A Reader on the Religious, Cultural, and Psychological Dimensions of Dreaming*, edited by Kelly Bulkeley, 249-264. New York: Palgrave, 2001.

Week 12 - Thur. Mar. 27
Student presentations I

Week 13 - Thur. Apr. 3
Student presentations II

(April 26 last day allowable for take-home exam submission)

University Regulations for All College of the Humanities Courses (Updated November 22,2024)

Academic Dates and Deadlines

This schedule contains the dates prescribed by the University Senate for academic activities. Dates relating to fee payment, cancellation of course selections, late charges, and other fees or charges will be published in the Important Dates and Deadlines section of the Registration Website.

Copies of Written Work Submitted

Always retain for yourself a copy of all essays, term papers, written assignments or take-home tests submitted in your courses.

Online Learning Resources

[On this page](#), you will find resources collected by Carleton Online to help you succeed in your online courses; Learning Strategies and Best Practices, Study Skills, Technology and Online Interaction and Engagement.

Academic Integrity Policy

The University Academic Integrity Policy defines plagiarism as “*presenting, whether intentionally or not, the ideas, expression of ideas or work of others as one’s own.*” This includes reproducing or paraphrasing portions of someone else’s published or unpublished material, regardless of the source, and presenting these as one’s own without proper citation or reference to the original source. Examples of sources from which the ideas, expressions of ideas or works of others may be drawn from include but are not limited to books, articles, papers, literary compositions and phrases, performance compositions, chemical compounds, artworks, laboratory reports, research results, calculations and the results of calculations, diagrams, constructions, computer reports, computer code/software, material on the internet and/or conversations.

Examples of plagiarism include, but are not limited to:

- any submission prepared in whole or in part, by someone else, including the unauthorized use of generative AI tools (e.g., ChatGPT)
- using ideas or direct, verbatim quotations, paraphrased material, algorithms, formulae, scientific or mathematical concepts, or ideas without appropriate acknowledgment in any academic assignment
- using another’s data or research findings without appropriate acknowledgement
- submitting a computer program developed in whole or in part by someone else, with or without modifications, as one’s own
- failing to acknowledge sources with proper citations when using another’s work and/or failing to use quotations marks.”

Plagiarism is a serious offence that cannot be resolved directly by the course’s instructor.

The Associate Dean of the Faculty follows a rigorous [process for academic integrity allegations](#), including reviewing documents and interviewing the student, when an instructor suspects a violation has been committed. Penalties for violations may include a final grade of “F” for the course.

Co-operation or Collaboration

An important and valuable component of the learning process is the progress a student can make as a result of interacting with other students. In struggling together to master similar concepts and problems

and in being exposed to each other's views and approaches, a group of students can enhance and speed up the learning process. Carleton University encourages students to benefit from these activities which will not generally be viewed as a violation of the Policy. With the exception of tests and examinations, instructors will not normally limit these interactions.

Students shall not co-operate or collaborate on academic work when the instructor has indicated that the work is to be completed on an individual basis. Failure to follow the instructor's directions in this regard is a violation of the standards of academic integrity. Unless otherwise indicated, students shall not co-operate or collaborate in the completion of a test or examination.

Group Work: There are many cases where students are expected or required to work in groups to complete a course requirement. Normally, students are not responsible for violations of this policy committed by other members of a group in which they participate.

More information on the process [here](#).

Academic Accommodations

Academic accommodation refers to educational practices, systems and support mechanisms designed to accommodate diversity and difference. The purpose of accommodation is to enable students to perform the essential requirements of their academic programs. At no time does academic accommodation undermine or compromise the learning objectives that are established by the academic authorities of the University.

Carleton is committed to providing academic accessibility for all individuals. You may need special arrangements to meet your academic obligations during the term. The accommodation request processes, including information about the *Academic Consideration Policy for Students in Medical and Other Extenuating Circumstances*, are outlined on the [Academic Accommodations website](#).

Requests for Academic Accommodation

You may need special arrangements to meet your academic obligations during the term. For an accommodation request, the processes can be [found here](#).

Addressing Human Rights Concerns

The University and all members of the University community share responsibility for ensuring that the University's educational, work and living environments are free from discrimination and harassment. Should you have concerns about harassment or discrimination relating to your age, ancestry, citizenship, colour, creed (religion), disability, ethnic origin, family status, gender expression, gender identity, marital status, place of origin, race, sex (including pregnancy), or sexual orientation, please contact the [Department of Equity and Inclusive Communities](#) at equity@carleton.ca.

Grading System at Carleton University

Standing in a course is determined by the course instructor subject to the approval of the Faculty Dean. This means that grades submitted by the instructor may be subject to revision. No grades are final until they have been approved by the Dean.

The system of grades used, with corresponding grade points and the percentage conversion can be found [here](#).

Course Sharing Websites and Copyright

Classroom teaching and learning activities, including lectures, discussions, presentations, etc., by both instructors and students, are copy protected and remain the intellectual property of their respective author(s). All course materials, including PowerPoint presentations, outlines, and other materials, are also protected by copyright and remain the intellectual property of their respective author(s).

Students registered in the course may take notes and make copies of course materials for their own

educational use only. Students are not permitted to reproduce or distribute lecture notes and course materials publicly for commercial or non-commercial purposes without express written consent from the copyright holder(s).

[More information](#)

Student Rights and Responsibilities at Carleton

Carleton University strives to provide a safe environment conducive to personal and intellectual growth, free of injustice and characterized by understanding respect, peace, trust, and fairness.

The [Student Rights and Responsibilities Policy](#) governs the non-academic behaviour of students. Carleton University is committed to building a campus that promotes personal growth through the establishment and promotion of transparent and fair academic and non-academic responsibilities.

Deferred Term Work

In some situations, students are unable to complete term work because of extenuating circumstances beyond their control, which forces them to delay submission of the work. Requests for academic consideration are made in accordance with the [Academic Consideration Policy for Students in Medical or Other Extenuating Circumstances](#).

Students who claim short-term extenuating circumstances (normally lasting up to five days) as a reason for missed term work are held responsible for immediately informing the instructor concerned and for making alternate arrangements with the instructor. If the instructor requires supporting documentation, the instructor may only request submission of the University's self-declaration form, which is available on the [Registrar's Office website](#). The alternate arrangement must be made before the last day of classes in the term as published in the academic schedule.

1. Normally, any deferred term work will be completed by the last day of term. In all cases, formative evaluations providing feedback to the student should be replaced with formative evaluations. In the event the altered due date must extend beyond the last day of classes in the term, the instructor will assign a grade of zero for the work not submitted and submit the student's earned grade accordingly; the instructor may submit a change of grade at a later date. Term work cannot be deferred by the Registrar.
2. In cases where a student is not able to complete term work due to extenuating circumstances lasting for a significant period of time/ long-term (normally more than five days), the instructor and/or student may elect to consult with the Registrar's Office (undergraduate courses) or Graduate Registrar (graduate courses) to determine appropriate action.
3. If a student is concerned the instructor did not respond to the request for academic consideration or did not provide reasonable accommodation, the student should follow the appeals process described in the [Academic Consideration Policy](#).
4. If academic consideration is granted, but the student is unable to complete the accommodation according to the terms set out by the instructor as a result of further illness, injury, or extraordinary circumstances beyond their control, the student may submit a petition to the Registrar's Office (undergraduate courses)/Graduate Registrar (graduate courses). Please note, however, that the course instructor will be required to submit an earned final grade and further consideration will only be reviewed according to established precedents and deadlines. (More information: [Undergraduate](#) | [Graduate](#)).

Deferred Final Exams

Students who are unable to write a final examination because of extenuating circumstances, as defined in the [Academic Consideration Policy](#), may apply for accommodation. Normally, the accommodation for a missed final examination will be granting the student the opportunity to write a deferred examination. In

specific cases when it is not possible to offer a deferred examination, and with the approval of the Dean, an alternate accommodation may be made.

The application for a deferral must:

1. be made in writing to the Registrar's Office no later than three (3) working days after the original final examination or the due date of the take-home examination; and,
2. be fully supported by appropriate documentation. In cases of short-term extenuating circumstances normally lasting no more than five (5) days, students must include the University's self-declaration form, which can be found on [the Registrar's Office website](#). Additional documentation is required in cases of extenuating circumstances lasting longer than five (5) days and must be supported by a medical note specifying the date of onset of the illness, the (expected) date of recovery, and the extent to which the student was/is incapacitated during the time of the examination. The University's preferred medical form can be found at the Registrar's Office [here](#).

Academic Consideration Policy

As per the [Academic Consideration Policy](#), if students encounter extenuating circumstances that temporarily hinder their capacity to fulfil in-class academic requirements, they can request academic consideration. The Academic Consideration for Coursework is only available for accommodations regarding course work. Requests for accommodations during the formal exam period must follow the [official deferral process](#).

NOTE: As per the Policy, students are to speak with/contact their instructor before submitting a request for Academic Consideration. Requests are not automatically approved. Approving and determining the accommodation remains at the discretion of the instructor. Students should consult the course syllabus about the instructor's policy or procedures for requesting academic consideration. [More information here](#).

Financial vs. Academic Withdrawal

Make sure that you are aware of the separate deadlines for Financial and Academic withdrawal!

Making registration decisions in Carleton Central involves making a financial and academic commitment for the courses you choose, regardless of attendance. If you do not attend, you must withdraw in Carleton Central within the published deadlines to cancel your registration. A fee adjustment is dependent on registration being canceled within the published [fee deadlines](#) and dependent on your course load. A course dropped after the deadline for financial withdrawal will receive a grade of Withdrawn (WDN), which appears on your official transcript.

Even if you miss the deadline for financial withdrawal, you might decide to drop a course to avoid a failure or a poor grade showing up on your student record and bringing down your CGPA. It is your responsibility to drop the course via Carleton Central within the published [deadlines](#) (see Academic Withdrawal).

If you are considering withdrawing from a course, you may want to talk to an advisor first. Course withdrawal may affect your student status, as well as your eligibility for student funding, immigration status, residence accommodation and participation in varsity sports, etc. Additionally, remember that once you choose your courses, you must use the "Calculate amount to pay" button to determine the correct amount of fees to pay.

Carleton Central is your one-stop shop for registration activities. If you are interested in taking a course, make sure to complete your registration. Simply attending a course does not mean you are registered in it, nor is it grounds for petition or appeal.

Mental Health and Wellness at Carleton

As a student you may experience a range of mental health challenges that significantly impact your academic success and overall well-being. If you need help, please speak to someone. There are numerous resources available both on- and off-campus to support you. For more information, please consult <https://wellness.carleton.ca/>

Emergency Resources ([on and off campus](#))

- Suicide Crisis Helpline: call or text 9-8-8, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.
- For immediate danger or urgent medical support: call 9-1-1

Carleton Resources

- Mental Health and Wellbeing: <https://carleton.ca/wellness/>
- Health & Counselling Services: <https://carleton.ca/health/>
- Paul Menton Centre: <https://carleton.ca/pmc/>
- Academic Advising Centre (AAC): <https://carleton.ca/academicadvising/>
- Centre for Student Academic Support (CSAS): <https://carleton.ca/csas/>
- Equity & Inclusivity Communities: <https://carleton.ca/equity/>

Off Campus Resources

- Distress Centre of Ottawa and Region: call 613-238-3311, text 343-306-5550, or connect online at <https://www.dcottawa.on.ca/>
- Mental Health Crisis Service: call 613-722-6914 or toll-free 1-866-996-0991, or connect online at <http://www.crisisline.ca/>
- Empower Me Counselling Service: call 1-844-741-6389 or connect online at <https://students.carleton.ca/services/empower-me-counselling-services/>
- Good2Talk: call 1-866-925-5454 or connect online at <https://good2talk.ca/>
- The Walk-In Counselling Clinic: for online or on-site service <https://walkincounselling.com>

The Centre for Indigenous Support and Community Engagement

The Centre for Indigenous Initiatives is proud to offer culturally centered individual counselling to students who self-identify as First Nation, Metis or Inuk. Through this service, Indigenous students [can access confidential, individual sessions for support with personal, mental health or academic challenges.](#)

Department Contact Information

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