

Mondays, 7-10pm

**BUT NOTE:**

(a) Our First Class meets on  
**Wednesday, January 11th**  
**ATTENDANCE REQUIRED**  
 at First Class

(b) No class on  
 MLKing Jr. Holiday  
 (Monday, January 16th)

# RELIGION, SOCIAL JUSTICE, AND URBAN DEVELOPMENT

URBS 4050 / RELS 4050 / AFAM 4050

Spring 2023

## COURSE FACULTY

- [Andrew T. Lamas, JD](#)

Contact by telephone, text, or email.

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## COURSE DESCRIPTION

“We have to talk about liberating minds as well as liberating society.”

—Angela Y. Davis

Urban development has been influenced by religious conceptions of social and economic justice. Contested traditions within Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Nation of Islam, Buddhism, and Humanism—and other religions and philosophies—have yielded powerful critiques of oppression and hierarchy as well as alternative frameworks for ownership, governance, production, labor, and community. Historical and contemporary thought and case studies from the Americas, Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Middle East will be considered, as we examine the ways in which religious responses to poverty, inequality, violence, and ecological destruction have generated new forms of resistance, identity, solidarity, and social life. Put another way, this course works at the substantive intersection of community, ecology, justice, and economy, while probing diverse conceptions of power, humanity, knowledge, and interpretation. We will seek to understand selected traditions, currents, and movements within religious and philosophical praxis, particularly as relates to issues of domination, alienation, and exploitation, and the promise of economic alternatives for poor and working people. If you are interested in critiques of empire and social systems of control, if you are interested in religious understandings of capitalism, socialism, and other forms of political economy, if you are interested in ways in which religion has been used (and might be used) to support movements for abolition, liberation, and economic justice, and if you are interested in co-producing this course with me around other issues and questions of interest to you, then I trust that we will find (and make) this course provocative, enlightening, and useful—and maybe even inspiring.

Walter Benjamin, one of my favorite critical theorists, wrote in his sixth thesis on the concept of history, **"Every age must strive anew to wrest tradition away from the conformism that threatens to overpower it."** If we make it so, this course can be the site for the kind of teaching and learning that educates in the best traditions of the liberal arts, that sharpens the powers of observation and critical thinking, that awakens empathetic understanding about what is beyond the familiar, that inspires the imagination, and that provokes and enlarges the realm of the possible. So, yes, I have high hopes for what we might accomplish *together*.

## PREFACE

What you will find here is not a syllabus but just an appetizer of sorts to the full meal we will share together. I am confident that we will co-produce an intellectually exciting and useful time together. In early January, prior to the start of Spring Term, I plan to contact every student who is enrolled in the course at that point ... so that we might get to know each other a bit ... and plan together what topics, issues, and questions we will study. I always welcome student participation in the design of the process and substance of the course; moreover, I encourage (and help) each student to develop their own intellectual agenda in this course.

In my more than three decades on Penn's faculty, I have endeavored to make this course a particularly special one—striving to create a setting for the development of close, personal relations and deep, intellectual engagement ... by a variety of means (e.g., honest and respectful dialogue, shared meals on campus or at my home, historical walking tours in Philadelphia and beyond, thought-provoking guest speakers, and more).

In recent years, the global pandemic has upset so many of our plans—threatening, among other things, the development of the vital, intellectual community that I believe is necessary for creative and critical reflection about matters of significance. With your cooperation and determination, we can refuse to be defeated by the many, interrelated crises that mark our era. Together, we can find a way to conceptualize and to address the most important theoretical and practical questions at the intersection of religion, justice, and development—questions so relevant to our present situation.

Meeting the challenges of our unique, contemporary situation will require a special level of care, consideration, commitment, provocation, and discipline—so that we all might continue to immerse ever more deeply throughout the course into the fascinating material on offer here. Our project requires not just an intellectual commitment, but also, I think, a pledge to get to know one another's minds and hearts—and, in the process, to abandon no one ... because surely everyone in our class will have something to learn and something to teach.

No prior knowledge of or commitment to any particular religion is required for this course. Someone committed to a particular faith tradition is as welcome as an atheist or a humanist. The course has attracted students from a very broad range of views, though I think everyone who has appreciated the course has been animated by, among other things, an interest in the problem of interpretation, an openness to critical inquiry, and a desire to get to the root of important things.

I am excited to meet you and to begin our journey—our shared meal—together.

You are warmly invited to contact me as often as you like—by email, by text, by mobile phone, by Zoom, or whatever. *Feel free to contact me even before the course begins.* The best times to reach me are on weekdays before 12 noon and after 6pm (Philadelphia time); and, I am also available in the afternoons and evenings on Saturdays and Sundays.

If you have not yet enrolled in the course and are undecided at this point, you are welcome to contact me before the course begins ... so that I might help you think about whether this course is for you, and, if not, then what other courses at Penn might be useful to you.

For those enrolled in the course and for those not yet enrolled but considering doing so, please note that **attendance in the first class meeting is mandatory**. Those who miss the first class—the launching of our boat—will not be permitted to take the journey with us.

**FOR SPRING TERM 2023, class will not be held on Monday, January 16th (due to the Martin Luther King, Jr. Holiday); so, our FIRST CLASS WILL BE WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 11th. (Yes, Wednesday!)**

*Our course has two main components.*

## COMPONENT ONE:

### BE WELL PREPARED FOR, ATTEND, AND CONTRIBUTE TO EACH WEEK'S CLASS.

#### ❖ COMPONENT ONE (PARTICIPATION) IS WORTH 50% OF YOUR COURSE GRADE.

- **Class attendance is expected** (but, of course, absences will be excused where appropriate and approved in advance). Our class meeting will take place weekly, according to Penn's academic calendar. *Attendance at the first class is mandatory. For now, masking is optional.*
- **Join with me in creating our intellectual community through serious and thoughtful participation in class and in our course's Small Breakout Groups** (held in and out of class—via Zoom, when necessary).
- **Review the assigned readings, videos, and any other materials provided to you for each class.** All reading materials and videos will be provided to you, so you will not have to purchase any required items for this course. I suggest you devote at least three hours each week to the assigned materials.
- **Bring these two things to class each week:**
  - *A quotation* from one of the assigned materials that you find particularly interesting, useful, or provocative.
  - *A question* that you have formulated in response to the assigned materials.

These quotations and questions will be helpful in framing our weekly class discussions. The process of thoughtfully selecting quotations and preparing questions may also prove useful to you in formulating a topic for your Final Paper/Project.

## COMPONENT TWO:

### COMPLETE YOUR FINAL PAPER/PROJECT BY MAY 9<sup>th</sup>.

#### ❖ COMPONENT TWO (FINAL PAPER/PROJECT) IS WORTH 50% OF YOUR COURSE GRADE.

- **Your Final Paper/Project will be due on the last day of the Final Examination period.** Once the course begins, the purpose, scope, and requirements regarding the Final Paper/Project will be specified. Each student will meet with Prof. Lamas—early in the term—to develop an appropriate topic and plan for completion. Of course, the topic may change during the term—as students encounter the wide range of fascinating course materials.

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- ❖ **Students are encouraged to contact Prof. Lamas, as often as they like, to discuss the course (or *anything else* that is going on).**
- ❖ **Prof. Lamas also welcomes the opportunity to arrange extra in-person and/or Zoom sessions—outside of our regularly scheduled class time—on special topics of interest to some or all of the students in our course.**

In other words, every effort will be made to ensure that the questions you want addressed and the issues you want covered are a part of this course. Where necessary, the topics, readings, etc. featured in this year's syllabus will be changed to meet the needs and interests of my students.

For me, this is a matter of the highest pedagogical principle.

THE DETAILED COURSE SYLLABUS WILL BE PROVIDED EARLY IN THE SPRING TERM.

If you would like a copy of a prior year's syllabus,  
please do not hesitate to contact me.

IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO HELP SHAPE THE SPRING TERM 2023 SYLLABUS,  
PLEASE CONTACT PROF. LAMAS *and share your thoughts...*

Together, let's make this a course that we need now.

THANK YOU.

