

University of Toronto
Department of Political Science
Department for the Study of Religion

JPR 459– FANATICISM: A POLITICAL HISTORY
SYLLABUS 2025
Fall Term – Weds. 3-5, ES 1047

Instructor: Joseph Dattilo
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Hours: Wednesday 1-2:30 PM (Drop In)
Thursday 2-4:00 PM (By Appointment)

THEMES:

This seminar in Political Theory and Study of Religion will explore the modern history of the concept of ‘fanaticism’ and its cognates - *Schwärmerei*, enthusiasm, extremism, zealotry - to critically evaluate its role in the development of political modernity. In the context of our current times of religious and political extremism, revisiting the history of the ways in which the figure of the “fanatic” has marked Western political and religious thought is timely and important. A focus on the concept of the “fanatic” from the perspective of its various uses in political and religious thought from the Early Modern period through the Enlightenment and up to the present day, provides a fascinating opportunity for a critical review of the secular, rationalist, and scientific assumptions underwriting modern political forms and concepts, especially those of liberal democracy. At stake is the role of concepts of reason, autonomy, abstraction, conviction, passion and heteronomy for a democratic, egalitarian and emancipatory politics. While recognizing the very real dangers that fanaticism and related forms of ‘extremism’ pose to political life, we will reflect seriously on the dangers of an unqualified excoriation and liberal banishment of passionate conviction, extreme partisanship, agonism and antagonism from the political realm. We will be able to critically assess recent calls for an Enlightenment ‘reloaded’ or an “Enlightenment 2.0” refusing the lazy, one-dimensional recuperation of this complex, contested and contradictory period, while reflecting on the ways in which this heritage continues to function as a force for disqualifying or neutralizing not only real political dangers, but also emancipatory political possibilities. The course will thus also offer critical insight into the ways in which religious and political differences between the West and colonial “others” were, and continue to be, central to the elaboration of Western theoretical discourse on fanaticism and extremism as forms of “political pathology”.

Of special interest in our approach to the concept of fanaticism are the ways in which it challenges us to reconsider the political significance of time and language. Eschatological, millenarian, revolutionary and/or disruptive, those considered to be ‘fanatical’ challenge dominant, linear views of history, periodization, and temporal progression, introducing figures of rupture, renewal or redemption. Fanaticism is also often associated with modes of discourse whose epistemological ground takes the form of

revelation or inspiration, and where the performative power of speech can be understood as properly ontological. Such speech does not articulate a truth which takes the “constative” form of a neutral, objective knowledge of “facts” or values upon which we might all agree; rather, it is the truth of an engaged subject, of deep conviction, a gesture of intense partisanship. We will thus reflect on the ways in which in politics, at least in any given *concrete* situation, truth is by definition one-sided - its universality is and can only be proclaimed from a partisan position.

We will study central moments or contexts where fanaticism is figured as a political and philosophical problem – the Radical Reformation; the Enlightenment attack on religion and 18th C revolutionary fervour in France and Haiti; the Age of Empire - US abolitionism; European colonialism and anti-colonialism, and the totalitarian catastrophe of the 20th c and the rise of fascism in the 21st. This approach to the intellectual history of the idea and its uses should give us new critical insight into the present resurgence of radical, extremist religious and political thought and practice. We will largely rely on primary texts in the history of political thought, philosophy and religious studies that take up the theme of fanaticism and its cognates supplemented by a few essential secondary sources.

REQUIREMENTS:

1. 4 response papers to readings, maximum 800 words.

Weight: 30%

Students will write bi-weekly critical reflections based on the week’s readings. The object of these reflection papers is to: 1. demonstrate your grasp of central issues in the week’s readings; 2. bring the readings into critical conversation with one another and with the central themes of the week and the course more broadly; 3. develop a critical evaluation of one or more of the readings’ central contributions. Papers should NOT summarize readings, but demonstrate a critical engagement with them. Response papers must be posted on Quercus **no later than 6:00 p.m. on the day before class** and are to be read by all class members before critical discussion. The class will be divided into two equal groups. Group 1 will begin posting in Week 2, Group 2 in Week 3. Once you have been designated a group, you must stick to the bi-weekly schedule.

2. Active participation in discussion

Weight: 20%

Students are expected to attend every class prepared to critically discuss the required readings, and to participate fully in the discussion through both attentive listening and speaking. Missed classes require a documented excuse.

3. Final Paper, 3,500-4,000 words

Due: at 11.59 PM Dec. 1 Weight: 50%

Students will submit a final research paper related to the content of the course. Students will select their own topic but must discuss their paper with the instructor prior to submission. Material in excess of the 4,000th word may not be graded.

WEB SITE & EMAIL:

The Quercus web site will be used to post the syllabus, readings, response papers, discussions, announcements, and other relevant items. You must have a valid UTOR email

registered and should consult Quercus regularly. I'm happy to answer emails about the course, but please don't expect me to respond to requests for information available on Quercus or the syllabus. Matters of substance concerning the course material, essays or personal issues should be discussed in person during office hours, or by appointment.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY:

Plagiarism is a serious academic offense and will be dealt with accordingly. Students must read "Tips for Avoiding Academic Misconduct" <http://www.artsci.utoronto.ca/osai/students/avoid-misconduct/tips-for-avoiding-academic-misconduct> and the University's "How not to Plagiarize" document, <http://www.writing.utoronto.ca/advice/using-sources/how-not-to-plagiarize> and are encouraged to discuss with the instructors if they are unsure of what constitutes plagiarism or academic dishonesty. Plagiarism does not only apply to essays, but of course the reading responses as well.

THE USE OF AI – Large Language Models such as ChatGPT or Copilot - IS STRICTLY FORBIDDEN IN THIS COURSE. Its use constitutes Academic Dishonesty. Students must read and abide by the AI Policy.

READING LIST: ** SUBJECT TO MODIFICATION**

All readings listed on Quercus are required, and you must read all the readings for each week before the class. Readings average around 100 pages per week, so plan your reading in advance. In each class students will read selected passages for discussion to one another. **Some of the material is challenging, and you must be prepared to read and re-read attentively. Your ability to discuss in class and your participation grade depend on a good familiarity with the readings. Do not come to class without the week's reading materials, as we will refer to the texts throughout the class.**

****CONSULT QUERCUS FOR THE UPDATED READING LIST BY WEEK****