

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN–MADISON

History & Religious Studies 411

THE ENLIGHTENMENT AND ITS CRITICS

Spring 2026

Tuesdays & Thursdays, 4:00-5:15 p.m.

1651 Mosse Humanities

Prof. Eric Carlsson

5217 Mosse Humanities

eric.carlsson@wisc.edu

Office hours: Wednesdays, 11:00-1:00, and by appointment

Course Description

The Enlightenment is a contested idea. Some scholars question the very notion that there existed a coherent set of developments in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that can meaningfully be labelled “the Enlightenment.” Many others accept the term but disagree about how to define it. In recent decades, the Enlightenment has also taken on broader cultural significance. Some celebrate it as a source of all that’s best in the modern world, while others critique it as a force for ill. Whether praised or criticized, the Enlightenment remains central to stories we tell ourselves about the “rise of modernity.”

In this course, we will delve into this charged field. While keeping in view the questions that exercise contemporary interpreters, we will focus on some key developments in European intellectual, cultural, and social history from roughly 1650 to 1800. This was an era when long-held assumptions about knowledge, nature, religion, politics, ethics, and the social order came under new scrutiny. Through their arguments, thinkers we now associate with the Enlightenment, as well as their critics, helped to shape approaches to these fields with lasting consequences. We will encounter some of the period’s most articulate and influential figures while also considering broader shifts in culture and society.

Religion will play a central role in this course. That’s because religion touched most aspects of life in early modern Europe, and many of the period’s central debates turned, directly or indirectly, on questions to which religious traditions had long given answers. Some thinkers rejected established religious authorities and sought a secular basis for understanding and ordering the world. Others aimed to reform their religious traditions in light of new ideas and circumstances. Critics of various stripes, meanwhile, rejected such attempts and charted alternative paths. This course will equip you to think historically about these developments.

Learning Outcomes

This course aims to spark and nourish your fascination with the fields of Enlightenment studies and European intellectual history. If you invest time, thought, and hard work in the course, you will also improve your ability to:

- explain key trends, flashpoints, personalities, and texts associated with the Enlightenment and its critics
- interpret primary sources from the past contextually, critically, and empathetically
- understand and evaluate major scholarly debates surrounding the Enlightenment
- construct strong historical arguments based on evidence and clear reasoning

Prerequisites and Course Designations

Prerequisites for this course are three credits in History or Religious Studies, or sophomore standing. This is a three-credit, intermediate-level course that meets either Humanities or Social Science breadth requirements and counts as Liberal Arts & Sciences credit in the College of L&S.

Credit Hours and Workload

We meet in person for two 75-minute periods each week over the semester. In addition, you are expected to spend an average of six hours each week reading, preparing for class discussions, visiting office hours, and writing papers, for a total of 135 hours over the semester (or 45 hours per credit, according to UW–Madison’s credit hour policy).

Requirements and Assessment

Grade Breakdown

If you’re an undergraduate, your grade for this course will be calculated as follows:

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|--------------------------|-----|
| • Class participation | 20% |
| • Five reading quizzes | 25% |
| • Take-home midterm exam | 25% |
| • Take-home final exam | 30% |

If you’re a graduate student, this is your grade breakdown:

- | | |
|------------------------|-----|
| • Class participation | 15% |
| • Five reading quizzes | 15% |
| • Research paper | 45% |
| • Take-home final exam | 25% |

All assignments and your final course grade will be calculated using the following scale:

93-100%=A	83-87%=B	70-77%=C	0-59%=F
88-92%=AB	78-82%=BC	60-69%=D	

Class Participation

In choosing to take this course, you are committing yourself to be present and an active participant in class. I will take attendance throughout the semester. If you become ill or face an emergency that requires you to miss a class session, please email me as soon as possible. More than two unexcused absences over the semester will lower your class participation grade.

Every class session will include discussion of the day's assigned readings and on a few days we'll spend most of the period in discussion. You are expected to read all required texts closely beforehand and to come ready to discuss them: to voice your insights and questions and to engage with those of your classmates. *You must bring a hard copy of assigned texts to class on the day they will be discussed.*

If you find it challenging to speak up in class, please come to office hours at the start of the semester and we'll discuss strategies for making this easier. Demonstrating your engagement with the readings in office hours will also raise your class participation grade.

Half of your class participation grade will be based on attendance and half on the quality of contributions to our discussions. You will receive a participation grade on a ten-point scale three times during the semester: on February 24, March 26, and April 30.

Reading Quizzes

Five brief in-class quizzes will test your knowledge and understanding of assigned readings. The format of the quizzes will vary. Some will ask for short answers, others for a brief paragraph in response to a prompt. The quizzes will be given on February 10, March 3, March 24, April 9, and April 23.

Take-Home Midterm Exam

The midterm will ask you to respond to a prompt asking you to analyze, synthesize, and reflect on readings, lectures, and class discussions during the first half of the course. Your response will be 1600-1800 words (5-6 pages). The exam will be distributed on March 3 and will be due on March 10 at 6:00 pm.

Take-Home Final Exam

The final will ask you to reflect on themes from across the whole course. Prompts will be distributed during the last week of class. You may choose from one of several options, and your response will be 1800-2000 words (6-7 pages). The final is due on May 5 at 6:00 pm.

Graduate Student Research Paper

In lieu of the mid-term exam, graduate students will write either a historiographical paper or a paper based on original research of about 15 pages. Please see me early in the semester (no later than February 18) to discuss possible topics and set a schedule for completing the paper. The paper will be due on April 14.

Honors Project

Undergraduates taking the course for Honors credit will pursue an independent project arising out of course topics and their own interests. This may take the form of a research paper or scholarly review. For those interested in literature, art, film, or other media, there are other formats. If you are taking the course for honors, please come to my office hours by February 18 to discuss options, determine a project, and set a schedule for completing it. The final project will be due on April 14.

Policy on Late and Missed Work

Except in the case of an emergency or documented illness, the midterm and final exam grade will be reduced by five percent for each 24-hour period an assignment is submitted after the due date. If you miss a reading quiz, you may make it up if (1) you have a documented illness or emergency, and (2) you contact me as soon as possible—normally on the same day you miss class—to arrange a time to make up the quiz.

Technology Policy

A large body of research shows that students process information more thoughtfully, grasp concepts better, focus their attention more sharply, and as a result earn better grades when they take notes with pen and paper rather than on a computer. For this reason, and because the temptation to get distracted by matters unrelated to class is strong, I ask that you refrain from using laptops during class. There are two exceptions to this general rule. You're exempt if (1) you are a McBurney student with a documented need, or (2) you come to my office hours and make a persuasive case for why you want to use one in class and how you will use it. Phones should be silenced and put away before class starts.

Academic Integrity

By enrolling in this course, you agree to uphold the high academic standards of UW–Madison. All work you turn in must be your own. In your papers you must cite sources carefully, whether you repeat someone else's exact words or paraphrase or draw on their ideas. Failure to do so constitutes plagiarism. Submitting work generated by AI also constitutes plagiarism. If you have specific questions about plagiarism and how to avoid it, please speak with me or consult <https://writing.wisc.edu/handbook/assignments/quoting-sources/>. If you turn in plagiarized work, you will earn a zero on the assignment, an academic misconduct report will be filed, and you may fail the course. For university policies on academic misconduct, see <https://conduct.students.wisc.edu/academic-misconduct/>.

Use of Generative AI

Generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools (ChatGPT, Copilot, Gemini, Claude, etc.) offer both opportunities and potential hazards for doing history. A central goal of this course is to help you develop skills in close reading, critical analysis and synthesis of sources and arguments, and historical thinking. These are skills that AI tools can't help you acquire, and their use in coursework can short-circuit the learning process and compromise the integrity of your work. Accordingly, the only acceptable use of AI in this course is limited proofreading for grammar or clarity on the exams and for formatting footnotes. If you do so, you must append a brief note explaining how you used AI. As noted above, submitting work generated by AI as your own will be treated as plagiarism and a violation of academic integrity.

Communication and Office Hours

I welcome meeting with students outside of class. You are encouraged to come to office hours at any time during the semester, whether you want to discuss a question or problem you've encountered in the course, to get help on an assignment, to explore an idea, or simply to chat. I

hold regular office hours in 5217 Mosse Humanities on Wednesdays from 11:00 am to 1:00 pm. If you have a schedule conflict then, let me know and we can arrange another time to meet. The best way to reach me is by email (eric.carlsson@wisc.edu). I check email regularly and will try to respond within 24 hours. Often I can reply sooner, but on weekends response time may be up to 48 hours.

Learning Accessibility

If you have an instructional need that requires accommodations, please inform me of this at the start of the semester or as soon as possible after a disability has been acquired or recognized. I will then either work directly with you or coordinate with the McBurney Center to provide reasonable accommodations. Disability information, including instructional accommodations as part of a student's educational record, is confidential and protected under FERPA.

UW–Madison Statement on Diversity

Diversity is a source of strength, creativity, and innovation for UW–Madison. We value the contributions of each person and respect the profound ways their identity, culture, background, experience, status, abilities, and opinion enrich the university community. We commit ourselves to the pursuit of excellence in teaching, research, outreach, and diversity as inextricably linked goals. UW–Madison fulfills its public mission by creating a welcoming and inclusive community for people from every background—people who as students, faculty, and staff serve Wisconsin and the world.

Course Texts

Many of our readings will consist of articles and excerpts from longer works. These are available in the coursepack, which you can [buy from the Law School Copy Shop](#) in room 2115 of the Law School. Each text is also posted as a PDF file on Canvas. You must bring a hard copy of the assigned texts to class on the day they will be discussed.

The required books are available at local and online stores. Copies of each have also been placed on reserve at College Library. These works come in multiple English versions; please use the following editions:

- John Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, ed. James Tully (Hackett, 1983)
- Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, ed. Robert DeMaria (Penguin, 2001)
- Voltaire, *Letters Concerning the English Nation*, ed. Nicholas Cronk (Oxford UP, 1994)
- Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Nathan the Wise, with Related Documents*, trans. and ed. Ronald Schechter (Bedford/St. Martin's, 2004)
- Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, trans. David Constantine (Oxford UP, 2012)

COURSE SCHEDULE

Unless otherwise noted, all required readings, excluding the books listed above, are available in the course reader and on [Canvas](#), where you will also find recommended readings for each class session. Full bibliographical information for all required and recommended texts is available in the "Course Documents" module on Canvas.

I. Introduction: What Is Enlightenment?

Jan 20 Course Introduction

Reading:

- Immanuel Kant, "An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?"

Recommended:

- James Schmidt, "What Sort of Question was Kant Answering When He Answered the Question: 'What Is Enlightenment?'?"
- Robin May Schott, "The Gender of Enlightenment"

Jan 22 Enlightenment Now

Reading:

- Steven Pinker, *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress*, 1-14, 29-35
- Caroline Winterer, "[Buck up, everyone! We are riding along the Enlightenment's long path of progress](#)"
- Peter Harrison, "[The Enlightenment of Steven Pinker](#)"

Recommended:

- John Robertson, "Europe's Enlightenment"
- Antoine Lilti, "In the Shadow of the Public: Enlightenment and the Pitfalls of Modernity"

Jan 27 Enlightenment Narratives

Reading:

- [An Interview with Jonathan Israel, Oxonian Review](#)
- Dan Edelstein, *The Enlightenment: A Genealogy*, 1-6
- Margaret Jacob, *The Secular Enlightenment*, 1-5
- David Sorkin, *The Religious Enlightenment*, 1-6
- J. C. D. Clark, *The Enlightenment: An Idea and Its History*, 1-10

Recommended:

- Samuel Moyn, "[Mind the Enlightenment](#)"
- Daniel Bell, "[The Enlightenment That Wasn't](#)"

II. Confession, Conflict, and the Quest for Order

Jan 29

Society, Religion, and Conflict

Reading:

- Benjamin J. Kaplan, "Coexistence, Conflict, and the Practice of Toleration"

Recommended:

- Alexandra Walsham, *Charitable Hatred: Tolerance and Intolerance in England, 1500-1700*, ch. 5

Feb 3

Secularizing Politics

Reading:

- Justin Champion, "Godless Politics: Hobbes and Public Religion"
- Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*

Recommended:

- Mark Lilla, *The Stillborn God: Religion, Politics, and the Modern West*, ch. 2

Feb 5

Toleration and Its Limits (I): The Dutch Republic

Reading:

- Baruch Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*
- Pierre Bayle, *Miscellaneous Thoughts on the Comet of 1680; Philosophical Commentary on the Words of Jesus Christ, "Compel Them to Come In"*

Recommended:

- Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, ch. 8
- Steven Nadler, *A Book Forged in Hell*, ch. 8
- Elizabeth Labrousse, *Bayle*

Feb 10

Toleration and Its Limits (II): England

QUIZ 1

Reading:

- John Locke, *A Letter concerning Toleration* (entire)

Recommended:

- James H. Tully, Introduction to Locke's *Letter concerning Toleration*
- J. R. Milton, "Locke's Life and Times"

III. Revolutions of the Mind

Feb 12

Rethinking Knowledge

Reading:

- Francis Bacon, *The New Instrument*
- René Descartes, *Discourse on Method*
- John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*

Recommended:

- Michel Malherbe, "Bacon's Method of Science"
- Richard Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Savonarola to Bayle*, ch. 9

- Vere Chappell, "Locke's Theory of Ideas"

Feb 17 The Newtonian Revolution

Reading:

- Isaac Newton, *Principia*, *Opticks*, and Letter to Richard Bentley
- Margaret C. Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment*, ch. 3

Recommended:

- I. Bernard Cohen, "The Newtonian Revolution"
- Larry Stewart, "Science and the Eighteenth-Century Public"

Feb 19 Skepticism and Reason's Limits

Reading:

- Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*
- Pierre Bayle, "David," in *Historical and Critical Dictionary*

Recommended:

- Graeme Hunter, "Blaise Pascal"
- Patricia Easton, "Sincerity and Skepticism in Pierre Bayle"

IV. The Public: Sociability and the Circulation of Ideas

Feb 24 Books, Readers, and the Press

Reading:

- Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*—start reading

Recommended:

- Michael Schaich, "The Public Sphere"
- T. C. W. Blanning, *The Culture of Power and the Power of Culture*, ch. 4
- Thomas Munck, *Conflict and Enlightenment*, ch. 3

Feb 26 New Venues of Sociability

Reading:

- Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*—keep reading

Recommended:

- Brian Cowan, "Mr. Spectator and the Coffeehouse Public Sphere"
- Dena Goodman, "Enlightenment Salons: The Convergence of Female and Philosophic Ambitions"
- Antoine Lilti, "The Kingdom of *Politesse*: Salons and the Republic of Letters in Eighteenth-Century Paris"

Mar 3 The Early English Novel: *Gulliver's Travels*

QUIZ 2

Reading:

- Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*—finish

Recommended:

- Laura Brown, "Reading Race and Gender in *Gulliver's Travels*"
- R. S. Crane, "The Houyhnhnms, the Yahoos and the History of Ideas"
- Douglas Lane Patey, "Swift's Satire on 'Science' and the Structure of *Gulliver's Travels*"

Mar 5 Religion and the Public Sphere

Reading:

- James Van Horn Melton, "Pietism, Politics, and the Public Sphere in Germany"

Recommended:

- Martin Gierl, "Pietism, Enlightenment, and Modernity"
- Ulrike Gleixner, "Pietism and Gender: Self-Modelling and Agency"

Mar 10 No Class. Take-home midterm due on Canvas at 6:00 p.m.

V. *Lumières*: The French Philosophes

Mar 12 Europe's Enlightenments and the Case of France

Reading:

- Voltaire, *Letters Concerning the English Nation*, 10-32

Recommended:

- Norman Hampson, "The Enlightenment in France"
- Daniel Roche, *France in the Enlightenment*, ch. 18
- J. C. D. Clark, *The Enlightenment: An Idea and Its History*, ch. 2

Mar 17 Battling *l'infâme*

Reading:

- Voltaire, *Letters Concerning the English Nation*, 32-66, 123-129

Recommended:

- Geoffrey Turnovsky, "The Making of a Name: A Life of Voltaire"
- John Leigh, "Voltaire and the Myth of England"

Mar 19 Reordering Knowledge: The Encyclopedia

Reading:

- Raymond Birn, "[Encyclopédie](#)"
- Jean Le Rond d'Alembert, "Preliminary Discourse to the Encyclopedia"
- Denis Diderot, "Encyclopedia"

Recommended:

- Daniel Roche, "Encyclopedias and the Diffusion of Knowledge"
- Robert Darnton, "Philosophers Trim the Tree of Knowledge"

Mar 24

Rousseau's Revolt

QUIZ 3

Reading:

- Tom Furniss, "Rousseau: Enlightened Critic of the Enlightenment?"
- Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts; Discourse on the Origin . . . of Inequality; Emile*

Recommended:

- Arthur M. Melzer, "The Origin of the Counter-Enlightenment: Rousseau and the New Religion of Sincerity"

VI. Commerce, Civilization, and Progress

Mar 26

The Battle of the Bees

Reading:

- Bernard Mandeville, "The Fable of the Bees"

Recommended:

- F. B. Kaye, Introduction to "The Fable of the Bees"
- Albert O. Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests*
- Istvan Hont, "The Early Enlightenment Debate on Commerce and Luxury"

— SPRING BREAK —

Apr 7

Commerce and the Civilizing Process

Reading:

- David Hume, "Of Commerce" and "Of Refinement in the Arts"

Recommended:

- Richard Whatmore, *The End of Enlightenment*, ch. 2
- Brad S. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation*, ch. 6

Apr 9

Economics, Ethics, and Progress

QUIZ 4

Reading:

- Frances Hutcheson, *A System of Moral Philosophy*
- Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* and *The Wealth of Nations*

Recommended:

- Laurence Dickey, "Doux-Commerce and Humanitarian Values"
- Emma Rothschild and Amartya Sen, "Adam Smith's Economics"

VII. *Aufklärung* and Its Critics in the German Lands

Apr 14

Enlightenment in a German Key

Reading:

- Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Nathan the Wise*—start reading

Recommended:

- Joachim Whaley, "The Protestant Enlightenment in Germany"
- Ian Hunter, "Multiple Enlightenments: Rival *Aufklärer* at the University of Halle 1690-1730"
- Martin Mulsow, "The Itinerary of a Young Intellectual in Early Enlightenment Germany"

Apr 16 Jews, Christians, and Toleration

Reading:

- Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Nathan the Wise*—finish reading

Recommended:

- Ronald Schechter, Introduction to the Bedford/St. Martin's edition
- H. B. Nisbet, *Gotthold Ephraim Lessing*, ch. 20

Apr 21 *Sturm und Drang*: The Early Romantic Movement

Reading:

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*—start reading

Recommended:

- Azade Seyhan, "What is Romanticism, and Where Did it Come From?"
- Ruth-Ellen B. Joeres, "Sturm und Drang"

Apr 23 The Romantic Novel: *The Sorrows of Young Werther*

QUIZ 5

Reading:

- Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*—finish

Recommended:

- David Constantine, Introduction to the Oxford World's Classics edition

Apr 28 The Magus of the North

Reading:

- Isaiah Berlin, "The Magus of the North"
- Oswald Bayer, *A Contemporary in Dissent*, 117-27
- Johann Georg Hamann, "Biblical Reflections" and Letter to Christian Jacob Kraus

Recommended:

- John R. Betz, "Reading 'Sibylline Leaves': J. G. Hamann in the History of Ideas"

VIII. Conclusion: The Enlightenment Today

Apr 30 Enlightenment Now, Revisited

Reading:

- Anthony Pagden, *The Enlightenment and Why It Still Matters*, Preface

Recommended:

- Ian Shapiro, *Uncommon Sense*, Introduction
- James Schmidt, "What Enlightenment Project?"

Take-home final due on Canvas on Thursday, May 5 at 6:00 p.m.