I. Course Description and Objectives:

In his biography of Pope John Paul II, *Witness to Hope*, author George Weigel writes that,

It may help to begin by thinking of Karol Wojtyla as a man who grew up very fast. The traumatic events that shaped his early life [Nazi occupation, the death of his parents, Soviet occupation, *et al.*] could have led him to conclude that human existence is irrational, even absurd. Wojtyla came to a different conclusion. Beginning with his late teenage years under the Nazi Occupation, he gradually came to the conviction that the crisis of the modern world was first of all a crisis of ideas, a crisis in the very idea of the human person. History was driven by culture and the ideas that formed cultures. Ideas had consequences. And if the idea of the human person that dominated a culture was flawed, one of two things would happen. Either that culture would give birth to destructive aspirations, or it would be incapable of realizing its fondest hopes, even if it expressed them in the most nobly humanistic terms.

... Through thousands of hours in the confessional, in hundreds of seminars, books, lectures, and articles, and throughout a pontificate that has addressed virtually every major issue on the human agenda, his fundamental conviction has remained constant: the horrors of late twentieth-century life, whether Nazi, communist, racist, nationalist, or utilitarian in expression, are the product of defective concepts of the human person.

The modern age prides itself on its humanism and declares freedom its noblest aspiration. Though Karol Wojtyla shares both the pride and the aspiration, he believes that neither contemporary humanism nor the freedom it seeks has been given a secure foundation. And the cracks in the foundations are not of interest to philosophers only; they are life-and-death matters for millions. For a humanism that cannot give an adequate account of its most cherished value, freedom, becomes self-cannibalizing. Freedom decays into license; anarchy threatens; and in the face of that anarchy a host of devils, each promising security amid the chaos, is set loose – demons like the supremacy of race (Hitler) or class (Marx), the messianic lure of utopian politics (Lenin), chapter after bloody chapter,
the butcher’s bull always lengthened by humanity’s increasing technological accomplishments.

What do you think? Is history, particularly recent history, as Pope John Paul II seemed to think, “driven by culture and the ideas that form cultures”? That is a worthwhile question – one you should be considering seriously during the course of the semester. It is not self-evident. But let me just say right off, in the interests of full disclosure, that this principle – about the importance of culture and the ideas that form culture, especially the idea of the human person – is one of the key underlying principles that will inform our work in this course. You may find during the course of the semester that you disagree with this basic principle. That’s fine. But at least you understand where I’m coming from. Everyone has basic presuppositions he or she brings to any study or analysis. Everyone. At least I’ve been honest and open and up-front about mine.

But there is something more that needs to be said. Saying that “culture” is a driving force in history and society may or may not be true, but it certainly begs another important question: namely, what do we mean by “culture” (at least as we’re using the term in this course)? People may mean a lot of things when they use the word “culture”: it may be thought to have something to do with the language people speak, the sort of art they make, or the sort of tools they leave behind. What I will mean when I use the term “culture” in this course has been captured nicely by Harvard sociologist Daniel Bell, who defines culture as follows:

I would define culture as the modalities of response by sentient men to the core questions that confront all human groups in the consciousness of existence: how one meets death, the meaning of tragedy, the nature of obligation, the character of love — these recurrent questions which are, I believe, cultural universals, to be found in all societies where men have become conscious of the finiteness of existence. ... Culture, thus, is always a ricorso. Men may expand their technical powers. Nature may be mastered by scientific knowledge. There may be progress in the instrumental realms. But the existential questions remain. The answers may vary — and do ... But the questions always recur. The starting point in understanding culture is not human nature (as in Greek thought), nor human history (as in Hegel and Marx), but the human predicament: the fact that man is ‘thrown’ into the world (who asked to be born?) And in the growing knowledge of that situation becomes aware of some answers — the received residues of culture — and gropes his way back to the questions to test the meanings for himself.

I take this paragraph to be offering not only a good description, but also good advice. Understanding culture is a good way of coming to “know ourselves.” Our first step is to become aware of the received residues of culture, after which we must grope our way back to the questions to test the meanings for ourselves.
The problem is that “culture” (in this sense) is an awfully big term; it can cover a lot of things. So we’ll have to narrow our focus a bit. In the context of this course, we will be asking two key questions. The first is this:

**What challenges does contemporary American culture pose for those who wish to hold and profess the Christian faith?**

But let me be clear about this before we move on. By claiming that something poses a “challenge” to the Christian faith, we need not conclude from this fact alone that the phenomenon or its ramifications are all necessarily bad. Tests and classes are meant to “challenge” students; that often makes them painful, but it doesn’t always make them bad. Something can be “challenging” to you because it involves pain and suffering, such as the loss of a parent, the failure to get a job or acceptance or perhaps rejection by one’s boyfriend or girlfriend. No one would wish such “challenges” on anyone. And yet we all know that it is in dealing with such challenges that one is made stronger and one’s horizon of concerns is made larger. Similarly, believing Christians need not see the challenges posed by contemporary culture to their faith in a totally negative light. Understanding and dealing with such challenges may well help to make one’s faith stronger and one’s conception of God larger and more appropriate to God’s infinite dignity.

Having said that, I would also propose to the class that the message of the Gospel – indeed, Christ Himself – has always been, and indeed will continue to be, “a sign of contradiction” to the world. As the blind prophet Simeon foretells to Mary upon encountering the Christ child: “Behold, this child is set for the fall and the rising of many ... and will be a sign of contradiction.” As St. Paul himself says: “What we preach is a scandal to the Jews and foolishness to the Greeks.” Christians would do well to take that statement seriously and think deeply about what it would mean to become a “scandal” to others and to allow oneself to look a fool, at least in the eyes of “the world.” Is Christ a sign of contradiction for you? Is the Church and the Christian faith an uncomfortable burden to carry?

Pope John Paul II, for one, was often called “a sign of contradiction” during his life. George Weigel calls him that, for example, in his biography of the pope. “John Paul II is frequently perceived in conflicting terms,” claims Weigel, “because he is, in fact, a sign of contradiction. His life, his convictions, and his teaching pose an unmistakable challenge to his times, to which he seems in many other respects so well-attuned.” Ironically, the Pope’s first book (published in Poland long before he became pope) was in fact entitled *A Sign of Contradiction*.

But what would it mean to be a “sign of contradiction” to the reigning culture? Might not such an idea turn our first question on its head. Remember, our first question was: “How does modern culture pose a challenge to Christianity?” Weigel suggests, on the contrary, that the Christian convictions of the Pope John Paul II posed “an unmistakable challenge to his
times.” Do you see the difference? Certainly modern culture poses unmistakable challenges to traditional Christian conviction. But by the same token, we might at least consider the possibility that the tradition of Christian conviction contains within it several key insights into the human condition (those “responses by sentient men to the core questions that confront all human groups in the consciousness of existence” of which Daniel Bell speaks) that can challenge the relative success or failure of our contemporary cultural environment. If the road to self-understanding involves becoming aware of the answers culture gives to the recurring questions of meaning and then testing them for oneself, that will be no less true for modern culture as it is for Christian conviction. Indeed, it may be more important to become aware of the presuppositions of modern culture and test them since, as presuppositions, they so often go unnoticed and thus unquestioned. It’s can be very instructive for students to discover that not everyone everywhere has always thought about the world, life, love, and the nature of obligation in just the same way we do currently among the educated classes in the United States. Along with our first question, then, we might also ask a second one, just as valid, namely: How might Christianity pose a challenge to modern culture?

So, to sum up, our goal in this course is the goal we are called to by Pope John Paul II in Fides et Ratio: an increased self-understanding and a more profound awareness of the fundamental questions that challenge all human persons. The means to this end in this course will involve an analysis of the roots of the modern world view and repeated reflection on two key questions:

* What challenges does contemporary American culture pose to those who would hold and profess the Christian faith? And:

* How might the answers given to the fundamental questions by Christianity pose a challenge to the presuppositions of modern culture?

II. Procedures and Requirements:

A) Reading and Reflection

This is a theology course, and theology has traditionally been defined as “faith seeking understanding.” The means to our goal of an increased "understanding of faith" will involve both reading and reflection. Reading assignments are posted on the course web site. Please be forewarned that there is a substantial amount of reading for this course; but then again, that only
makes sense, given that this is a college course. You’re paying for quality, right? Here’s where you get it. Quality means we challenge you to accomplish more than you ever thought possible before you came here. The amount of reading is not impossible, but it’s also not a lazy afternoon’s walk in the park. It’s meant to challenge you (in line with the topic of the course).

In order to encourage serious, analytic reading of the assigned texts, there will be an "executive summary" of the day's readings due at the beginning of each class. If you miss the class or forget your "executive summary," you get a zero. There are no late submissions. Businesses are increasingly pleading with us not to send them graduates who are not prepared for the world of work. If you miss a meeting or show up without the executive summary you were assigned, you get fired. It's time to grow up if you haven't already.

Unlike what happens in the business world, however, at the end of the semester, I will drop your three lowest "executive summary" grades. If you miss turning in an executive summary, you can simply take that zero as one of your low scores. Of course, if you don’t miss turning in any summaries, you’ll undoubtedly be better off statistically speaking.

B) Exams

You will also be asked to demonstrate your knowledge of the course material on two major exams: a mid-term and a comprehensive final exam (note the adjective “comprehensive”). These will be essay exams with questions on both the reading and the in-class lecture and discussion.

It has often been my practice in the past to offer review sessions to help students prepare for the exams. I am not required to give these review sessions, but students have often told me in the past that they found them extremely helpful. Be that as it may, there is no reason to schedule them if students aren’t interested. Thus, review sessions will be offered by request only and only if there is enough of a demand for them. Otherwise, questions can and should be handled during my regular office hours. Students should make a request for a review session no later than two class periods before an upcoming exam. There will be no review session for an exam if there is no demand for one.

C) Writing Assignments:
First, the good news: there will not be a large research paper for this course. The daily "executive summaries" that you will be doing will be sufficient writing for the semester. It's worthwhile noting, moreover, that doing these "executive summaries" is undoubtedly the best way to prepare for the exams.

III. Grading:

Please note that your final grade will be calculated according to the following formula:

Mid-Term Exam: 25 %
Final Exam: 35 %
Daily Executive Summaries: 20 %
Class Participation: 20 %

Please note as well that I assign letter grades based upon the following standard scale:

A  95-100
A-  90-94
B+  88-89
B   83-87
B-  80-82
C+  78-79
C   73-77
C-  70-72
D+ 68-69
D   63-67
D-  60-62
F   Anything below 60

IV. My Policy on Attendance:

I will take attendance daily at the beginning of each class. If you are late, it is your responsibility to see me after class to make sure you are marked present (but late). If you haven’t informed me of your presence, then you didn’t attend.

Please be forewarned that more than three absences will result in a decrease of one-third of a letter grade. Further absences will result in further proportionate decreases. After six absences, you will be excused from further attendance in an official way (by which I mean, you’ll suffer the academic equivalent of being fired).

Please also take note that I make no distinction between “excused” and “un-excused” absences. You may excuse yourself for whatever reason you deem important enough to miss class. I realize that there are certainly times when attending class is not the most important thing in your life. On the other hand, since you are enrolled, attending class is not unimportant if you are to get the educational benefit for which you are paying. Three absences, therefore, seems about right.

V. Required Readings:

All the readings for this course can be found in a large spiral-bound Reader that must be purchased at Reprint copy shop. Their address is 2035 SW Freeway @ Shepherd. Their phone number is 713-522-9299. It’s a good idea to call before you go.

VI. Some Important Comments Concerning Your Participation in the Class:
A) On Class Etiquette:

It should go without saying (but let me say it anyway) that respect for your fellow students in the class demands the following:

1. If you should (heaven forbid) come in late, please take your seat quietly.
2. Once you have arrived and class has begun, please don’t leave the classroom unless there is a dire physical necessity. Buying a coke or making a phone call is not a dire physical necessity.
3. In this class, you are permitted to bring food, drink, or any other legal stimulants to keep you awake and alert during the class period. But please keep slurping and gurgling to a minimum. And above all, please, clean up your own mess before you leave. The University’s hard-working janitorial staff should not have to clean up after lazy, slovenly students.
4. All cell phones and pagers must be turned off (or you will be turned out).
5. That means no text messaging on your cell phone during class. If you have something to say, say it out loud to everyone.
6. NB: It has also come to my attention that many students use their computers not to take notes during class, as they should, but to surf the web or check e-mail. This distracts other students greatly. Therefore, because of the many abuses that I have seen and others have mentioned to me, no computers will be allowed in this class. You’ll have to take notes the old-fashioned way: with a pen or pencil.
7. Bottom line: All electronic devices must be turned off and stowed for the duration of the class. Seat backs and tray tables must also be in their upright and locked position.

B) On Lecture and Discussion:

Students will take note, I hope, that this is a rather large class – something that makes discussion more difficult, or at the very least, much more unwieldy. While it is this instructor's view that learning should be an active process on the part of the students, he does not, unfortunately, determine class size. In short, we're screwed. The result of all this is that I will have to do a lot of lecturing. Students should be prepared, therefore, to take part in this type of class for the most part.

On the other hand, please believe that I am always open to earnest and serious questions. So although I tend to plunge through material rather madly, please be assured that I do welcome your questions and comments.

One caveat, however: This is a big class, and we do have to keep things moving along, so I can't necessarily call on everyone every time. I have found in the past with classes this size that discussions often tend to veer wildly off into other interesting, though perhaps only tangentially
related, topics. There is only one answer to this problem: Please listen to your classmates (this is an absolute requirement!), and try to respond to what's being said.

Above all, you should be self-aware enough to realize that it is difficult for everyone else as it is for you to make a point clearly and concisely in front of thirty or so classmates. So please be patient with yourself and with everyone else – especially the people you consider to be annoyingly stupid. (Here’s a hint: They’re not.)

My experience from past classes suggests that while students often find class discussions interesting, they also find them a bit frustrating. There is simply no way of discussing important issues thoroughly in the kind of time we spend in class. My conviction is that education either goes on outside of the classroom, or it does not go on at all. What discussion in the classroom can do (at its best) is merely pique your interest – “wet your appetite,” as it were. The real conversations must take place after you leave the classroom: with your friends and family, late at night in coffee shops or bars, over a glass of red wine, good beer, or strong, dark coffee. Here the time is too short and the surroundings are too sterile for real philosophy to take place. But we can at least begin the conversation.

Please be aware that I will often ask questions at random during my lectures about the reading material. You should be able to demonstrate some knowledge of the text, or at least some ability to think about the questions involved. If it is clear to everyone that you have not done the reading at all, then don’t be surprised if this fact ends up being reflected in your final grade. I won’t necessarily say, out loud, in front of everybody: “Well, I guess I can give you a big F for class participation.” But just keep in mind, that’s what will be happening.

The good news, however, is this: Regular and prompt attendance, coupled with a good faith effort to understand the text, can do wonders for your grade. That 15% for class participation is an easy A if you show up on time and do the reading.

C) On the Amount of Reading:

There will be plenty of reading for this class, so please be prepared to do it. This is an upper-level college course, therefore it is entirely appropriate for me to assign you upwards of 40 to 50 pages of reading between class periods. That is not a lot. You simply have to pace yourself. If you can read 20 pages per hour (with good understanding and retention), then you will need two hours or so to do the reading. If you read much more slowly, then you need longer. Budget your time accordingly.

Yes, I know you have other classes. They should be assigning you plenty of reading as well. For every class you take at this University, you should expect to put in between two to three hours of work for every hour you are in class. That’s a standard college work load at good colleges across the country. (Note that I said at “good” colleges, so please don’t tell me how
your friends at A&M spend half the time studying you do and the rest of the time drinking with their frat buddies or sorority sisters.)

I always read the comments students make on their evaluations at the end of the semester, and I take them all very seriously – except for this one: “Too much reading!” Here’s a hint: No, there’s not. You have asked us to teach you and prepare you to do first-rate work in business or professional school. And that is what I intend to do. I know how much reading you should be able to do. If you’re not interested in that sort of formation, then you want another class.

You need to be building muscles for excellence as opposed to getting yourself accustomed to mediocrity. In any course you take at this University, even if you are not particularly interested in the subject matter of the course, you should still take it as an occasion to develop the habit of excellence rather than the habit of mediocrity. Our successful students always – and I mean this very sincerely – they always thank us for having challenged them and, in particular, for having forced them to read and write more than they thought possible. But in any worthwhile endeavor, the joy and freedom that comes with attaining excellence demands work and discipline on the front end.

D) On the Modus Operandi of the Instructor:

Please note that you are responsible for all the reading material, even though we will not necessarily have time to cover it all in class. We will only cover highlights and the more difficult sections in class. Class lecture and discussion are merely parts of the process by which you educate yourself. The goal of a liberal arts education is to teach you how to teach yourself. You need to learn how to learn. There is no way we can teach you everything you need to know in four years. There is no way we can cover all the relevant points about the kind of important questions we will be covering in fifty or sixty minutes. That is the work of a lifetime. These four years are meant to prepare you for a lifetime of education. The end of the class period is when the real learning begins.

Note also that there are a number of different ways of running a class. One way would be for the professor to step back and merely facilitate a discussion between students. This class is too big for that. Another way would be for the professor to lecture in an orderly, point-by-point fashion, using PowerPoint slides or overhead projections. Some professors come into a class with five points to make, lay them out in order and are done. This method works with material for which you don’t need to have much context in order to “get” the points the speaker wants to make. That makes this method appropriate for communicating discrete bits of information, but not as good, in my view, for areas that require thinking. Ideas do not happen in isolation; they arise in a context, and their full truth can only be appreciated by understanding them within that context.
The process of acquiring this context may feel at times as though we’re wandering the circles around the center of the labyrinth. We eventually reach the center, but the process might make you wonder, “If our destination was here, why did we walk in all those circles? Why didn’t we just walk in a straight line and get to the point?” Because with me, the journey is often as important as the destination. I want students to see the center from a number of different angles, perspectives and points-of-view. I want them to begin to see the connections between the ideas. And I want them to begin to enter into a conversation: a conversation not just with me or with the other students in the class, but with a number of the greatest thinkers of the past and present: a conversation of interconnected ideas that is meant to extend beyond the classroom and into their everyday lives.

There is something else as well. Often in the process of learning, it is good to become comfortable with being uncomfortable; with not knowing exactly where you’re going for a while; with struggling through the twists and turns in order to find your way, trusting that if you take the coaching and do the work, the whole picture will eventually become clear, in fact much clearer than if you had just walked from Point A to Point B and said to yourself, “There, now that’s done.”

There are many truths that require something more than a five-point summary or that can’t be captured in a sound-bite. Most things worth knowing must be approached as you would approach a great work of art. You don’t just glance at it the way you glance at a stop sign. Great works of art require time: time to walk around them, to look at them from various angles, to mull them over, and sometimes just to sit and be in their presence, so that their truth and beauty can overflow into you. So prepare yourselves to listen, to take copious detailed notes, to engage with the reading material, and enjoy the ride.

VII. Movies Required for the Course:

My plan is to require the students to view several movies during the course of the semester, movies related to the content of the course. The movies are required, and there will be test questions asking you to relate the movies to the themes of the course. I will strive to make these movies available on-line on the Blackboard site.

Let me add just one more thing about the movies. In the past, when I have required movies, my experience has always been the same. Students complain more about having to watch the movies outside of class than about any other thing. And yet, all of them, without exception, have said after the semester was over that they learned the most about the readings from watching the movies. So watch them.
VIII. Contacting Me:

My office phone number is (713) 942-5059, and my e-mail address is Please feel free to use either. I must, however, warn you of the following. After literally dozens of hours playing phone tag with people, I no longer return phone calls. And because like most people who have an e-mail account in America, I am constantly being besieged by literally hundreds of e-mail messages, I don’t always return e-mail messages.

I’m sorry about this, but information overload has simply resulted in the break down of the electronic communications systems at many businesses. There are executives in major corporations who send automatic replies to each and every e-mail message that reads: “If you haven’t heard from me by the end of the day today, you will have to try again, because I simply delete all untouched e-mail messages at the end of each business day.” Experts estimate that businesses are losing as much as two hours of productive work per person per day while their employees are checking e-mail.

What does one do when the technology fails? Revert back to one of the classic, tried-and-true methods of the past: namely, walk over and actually talk to the person. It’s not as though we live on separate continents. We are within a two- or three-block radius of one another nearly every day. And you will be seeing me in class at this time every Monday, Wednesday and Friday. It’s not as though I am unavailable, simply because you can’t always get in touch with me instantly with the touch of a button. So, you may need to plan ahead.

So, if you need to get in touch with me, the best way is to make an appointment after class, or come see me either in my office or in Diedrich’s (try one place, then the other) during my regular office hours. And please, please, don’t get personally offended if I don’t respond immediately to your e-mail message. It may be a technical glitch (my system has on numerous occasions filtered out student e-mails), or I may just be way behind in checking e-mail. Either way, I cannot guarantee that I will be able to keep up with all the e-mail traffic. So, for example, at different points in the semester, I may have to declare a moratorium on e-mail in order to be able to finish grading exams.

IX. Finally:

Finally, please be assured I want you to do well in this course, and I will do whatever I can to see to it that you get the grade to which you aspire. But for now, don’t forget to:

* Check the course web site at: http://t4.stthom.edu/users/smith/modern_challenges
* Be sure you can access the course Blackboard site.

* Read the syllabus and the assigned reading for the next class.

* Pick up a copy of the Reader over at Reprint.

Most of all, a very warm welcome to you all!