Introduction:

A bit about me:

This will hopefully be my first and last lecture in this course.

My name is Dr. Nicholas Marshall, and for as long as I can remember, I have been fascinated by the myths and beliefs of various cultures. I grew up in Fort Wayne, IN. I was born in a trailer, but my parents upgraded at some point, and we moved to a two-story house near a local branch of my county library. I used to walk to the library, dragging a red wagon behind me, load up on as many books as I could, and drag my wagon back home. I devoured the children's editions of Greek, Roman, Indian, Norse, and Egyptian myths. My favorite Greek hero was Perseus and my favorite Greek monster was Medusa.

In 1994, when I was about 7 years old, the movie *Stargate* came out, and I fell in love with the idea of being an expert in dead languages and decoding some kind of ancient truths from lost civilizations. Other supporting mythemes included Indiana Jones, and seven years later, the Disney movie *Atlantis*, which also featured a linguist. I was also obsessed with Lord of the Rings (read the books cover to cover 18 times). As you may know, the author J. R. R. Tolkien was a linguist, and he created his mythology in part as a platform to play with some linguistic ideas. My friends thought I was crazy, but my favorite part of *Lord of the Rings* was the extremely dry appendices about Elven linguistics. I used to write letters to my parents in the Tengwar alphabet.

I grew up a fundamentalist Christian in the Southern Baptist faith. (I know I'm not supposed to reveal my religion to you, but since we are engaged in the study of some deeply personal ideas about the nature of reality, I think it's only fair that I reveal some of my background to you, because I want you to feel comfortable revealing your own background and worldviews to me). Anyways, my religion encouraged me to read the Bible, which I did cover-to-cover. I got to be pretty good at debating religious ideas with the supposed authorities of my religion, and eventually, disenchanted with what I perceived to be a large measure of anti-intellectualism on the part of my self-appointed spiritual leaders, I quietly slipped away.

But my interest in my religion, and the religions of others never diminished. My personal quest of understanding became more urgent when my father died due to a late diagnosis of colon cancer. I struggled at this time with all the usual meaning of life philosophical type questions. Philosophy promised (at least on the surface) some kind of solace, so I added Plato, Aristotle, and so on to my growing interests.

In high school, driven by my fanciful imagination, I studied Latin, which I figured would be a good foray into the other dead languages I wanted to explore. I've never regretted studying Latin, by the way. It has given me an invaluable insight into the structure of all the Indo-European languages, a greater facility with the English language, and a flexibility of linguistic intellect that has served me well in so many different domains (including a brief stint in computer programming). In the course of my teaching in this class, I will no doubt remind you constantly of the Greek or Latin roots of various "big words".

While in college, where I was set to be a classics major, I, on a whim, took a course on Zen Buddhism. This was my first introduction to the study of religion as an academic discipline and not a mere hobby. I became fascinated with the problems of the study of religion (not the least of which is the

very question of what a “religion” is), the relationship between religious myth and historical myth, the problems of interpretation, and so on and so forth. On the basis of this class, I decided to switch my major to religious studies. I figured it would be good to get a grounding in the academic study of my own tradition, so I enrolled in an early Christianity class. The teacher was a very important scholar in the field, David Brakke, and he guided me into studying Attic Greek and Coptic (ancient Egyptian written in Greek characters). Brakke’s expertise is ancient monasticism and Gnosticism a Christian heresy that imported a lot of ideas from Plato. At this point, for various reasons, my interests were drawn increasingly to the multiplicity of interpretations surrounding Plato.

After writing a BA thesis, I, through a fortuitous series of events, ended up travelling to Denmark and completing a MA degree in the Religious Roots of Europe. The curriculum for this new and experimental major was a comparative study of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam from their origins, through their interactions and into modernity. I maintained an interest in the old stuff, but I met someone while I was there who was interested in the new stuff. She later became my wife. During this time my interests more or less solidified (at least professionally) around the interchange of religious and philosophical ideas in various post-Platonic philosophers in Late Antiquity (the period defined as 100 to 600 CE). During this time, Christianity was on the rise, and the pagan Hellenistic philosophers of late antiquity were forced to adapt their ideas or perish under Imperial persecution. My dissertation explores the ideas of one of the major figures of this time, whose theory of ritual efficacy had some impact on the Christian idea of the eucharist.

My perspective on this course:

I am, with no sense of exaggeration whatsoever, thrilled to be teaching this class. The material and the breadth of the course are extremely exciting for me. Courses like this are disappearing from curricula around the country in favor of a theory of pragmatic education which will result in us all knowing only one limited technical domain. This course therefore marks a brilliant opportunity for you all to explore from a bird’s eye perspective the ideas of several millennia of human development, and to investigate the commonality that unites us (humans) all. In exploring ideas of people distant to us in both time and space, and recognizing the presence of similar concerns, methods, and mindsets, we gain a greater appreciation for the mutual journey that we are all on. On that note, I would encourage you not to underestimate the ingenuity of the ancients. They were not stupid even if they lacked the scientific method as developed in the Enlightenment.

I would also like to add that for my part I am far less interested in your ability to memorize names, dates, and historical facts, and far more interested in your ability to read, and I mean really READ primary source materials. Your syllabus already tells you something about this, but I’ll just add my understanding of what it means to READ (not skim, not get the gist of, not glance over) a text.

First of all, all good reading is re-reading. You should anticipate reading a text multiple times (and plan for it accordingly in your schedule). This is a 6 credit hour class, and you have a lot of readings. You should budget 2-3 hours (start off with three) for every one hour of in-class time. That’s 18 hours per week. Plan it. Write it down in an academic planner. No, really. Do it.

Secondly, you absolutely must know the surface meaning of the text. This is foundational information. You cannot have a vague idea like “some guy does something”. For narrative texts (like Gilgamesh) you need to know the major characters, what each of them does, who is the protagonist,

what is their main motivation, what is the sequence of steps they take to achieve their goal, what do the various characters think of each other and especially the protagonist, etc. etc. I would encourage you to review these kinds of question after a first reading, and if you cannot answer them immediately, read the text again. (I'll give you a handout of these questions, so you can keep it at hand, as you read).

For argumentative texts, like Aristotle or Aquinas, you need to know all the basic facts of the argument. What is the text arguing, what counterarguments does it consider? You need to be able to evaluate the reasonableness of the conclusion. Does it follow from the premises? What examples are used to justify the position the author takes?

Argumentative texts, unlike narrative texts, often require multiple readings and re-readings, even of individual lines. If on your second read-through a sentence doesn't make sense to you, I would encourage you to finish the paragraph and then go back and shore up your understanding of the whole paragraph. Don't spend too long on this, however, and if you are really stuck, bring your questions to class and we will discuss them.

This is a nice segue to the purpose of this class. I don't see my role in this class as a lecturer. I am therefore not going to go out of my way to be a font of information. Instead, I am going to act as a facilitator of a dialogue between you, the text, each other, and me and Professor Maloney. There is, underlying this class a quasi-mystical idea, which may be found in Plato, but which arguably reached its culmination in the philosophical ruminations of the 18th century philosopher, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, the notion that talking about something is the best way to reach an understanding of it, or, in the technical parlance, *dialectic*. It is your job to pose questions to the required readings of this class. To note the moments you don't understand, like the paragraphs in Aristotle that just don't make any sense to you, and bring those confusions into the classroom, into this laboratory, where perchance one of your fellow students can help enlighten you, but who in turn might themselves have a problem which you can help answer. Confusion is therefore not a liability in this classroom, it is the beginning of the possibility of understanding. If I, Professor Maloney, or a text says something that you don't understand, the greatest mistake you can make is to not ask for clarification.

Thus, in my view, this classroom is an intellectual coop. You will be graded individually, but that is merely a formality of the American educational system. In practice, you should consider one another partners in a great quest, perhaps the greatest quest of them all, certainly one greater than the return of jewelry to a volcano or the retrieval of a dark wizard's soul-boxes. This quest is real, and it's called the retrieval of your human birthright, the wisdom of the ages, which hasn't been stolen from you, but only "conveniently" and tragically forgotten. Are you ready to begin?