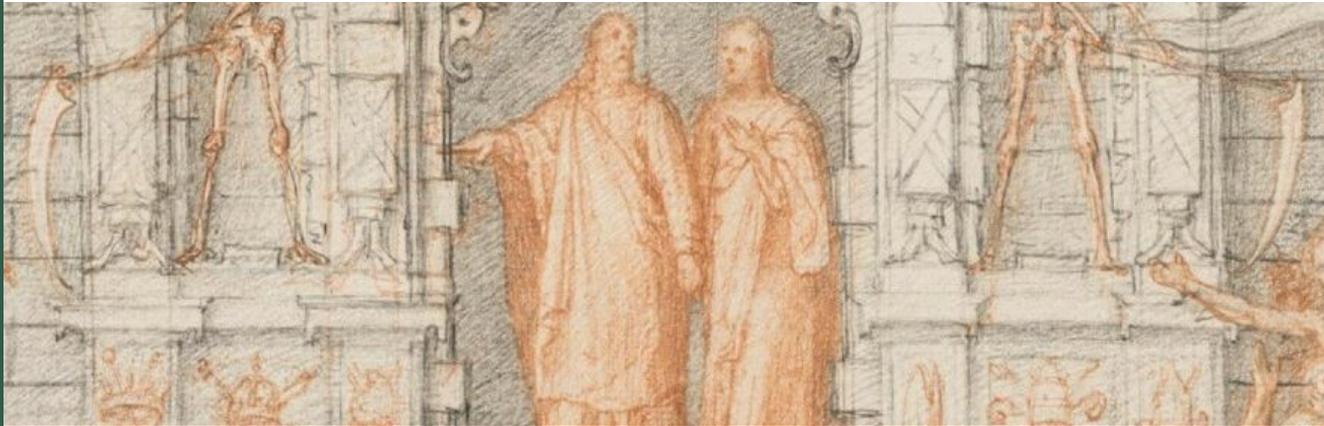


Dante's *Divine Comedy*



Christopher Utter
Humanities at Hertog

Tuesdays, 6-8 pm | Mar. 3, 10, 17, 24, 31 & Apr. 7
Syllabus | Spring 2026

HERTOG SPRING 2026 HUMANITIES SEMINAR

DANTE

Divine Comedy

Christopher Utter, American University

“Midway in the journey of our life I came to myself in a dark wood, for the straight way was lost.” With this beginning, Dante invites us to join him on his journey through Inferno, Purgatorio, and Paradiso.

At once an epic poem, a reflection on divine justice, and an investigation of the human good, Dante’s masterpiece encourages us to reflect how we too might be journeying within a “dark wood,” and how we might find the road up and out into the light.

This seminar will meet online weekly on **Tuesdays** from **6 to 8 PM ET**.

Course Materials:

- *The Divine Comedy*, trans. Robin Kirkpatrick (Penguin, 2012)

Discussion Papers: Each fellow will be responsible for completing a brief discussion paper (1- 2 pages, single-spaced). **Papers are due the day before your assigned session by 5 PM ET.** Please provide page numbers for textual citations. Your paper should be posted on the course Slack channel and will be part of the assigned readings for the session. Paper-writers should be ready to present their ideas during the seminar.

Tuesday, March 3, 2026

6:00 to 8:00 p.m. ET

Session I

Readings:

- *Inferno, Cantos 1-17*

Discussion Questions:

1. Canto 1.1-3: What is the dark wood in which Dante finds himself “at one point midway on our path of life”?
2. Canto 3.1: Why is Inferno depicted as a city? Why would Inferno be orderly?
3. Canto 4.41: What is it that the inmates of Limbo desire hopelessly?
4. Canto 11.31-48: Why would violence against oneself be worse than violence against others?

Tuesday, March 10, 2026

6:00 to 8:00 p.m. ET

Session II

Readings:

- *Inferno, Cantos 18-34*

Discussion Questions:

1. Canto 26.97ff: Why isn't Odysseus (Ulysses) with the virtuous heathens in Limbo, given that he seems to have the same aim (knowledge)?
 - a. Why is Odysseus punished by being continually burned?
2. Canto 34.61-67: What sin do Judas, Brutus, and Cassius have in common? Is this the worst possible sin? Why?

Tuesday, March 17, 2026

6:00 to 8:00 p.m. ET

Session III

Readings:

- *Purgatorio, Cantos 1-15*

Discussion Questions:

1. Cantos 1-2: Why does Dante make Cato the guardian of purgatory, given Cato's pagan status and suicide? Cato was a defender of the Roman Republic and an opponent of empire, but Brutus and Cassius were also opponents of empire, and yet they are in the center of Inferno being eaten by Satan, along with Judas. What are we to make of this contrast?
 - a. What is the liberty that Virgil says Dante seeks in his journey?
2. Canto 3.31-44: Is Virgil saying here that it's pointless to search for knowledge of causes through reason? What is the "fruitless yearning" he attributes to Plato and Aristotle?
 - a. Canto 3.133ff: What is the "contempt of Church" that condemns someone to Purgatory?
3. Canto 4.1-18: Beyond the immediate context, why does Dante reflect on the structure of the soul here? Is the soul one or many?
4. Canto 6.28-44: Why does the prayer of those still alive help those in Purgatory?
5. Canto 11.67-72: What is the weight the proud bear in Purgatory because they did not bear it while alive?

Tuesday, March 24, 2026

6:00 to 8:00 p.m. ET

Session IV

Readings:

- *Purgatorio, Cantos 16-33*

Discussion Questions:

1. Canto 16.94-112: In what way is law a “break” on love of the good? How would we know the source of “good government” and good laws?
2. Canto 17.103: What does it mean to say that love is the seed of all good powers?
 - a. Canto 18.34-38: What kinds of love are not deserving of praise? Which are?
 - b. Canto 18.43-74: Does free will require God as its source?
3. Canto 19.31-61: What is the “ancient witch” in Dante’s dream? Is this related to avarice?
 - a. Compare *Inferno*, Cantos 1 and 7; why is avarice particularly to be feared?
4. Canto 31.133-35: Why does Dante move “so many steps” for Beatrice, rather than for God?

Tuesday, March 31, 2026

6:00 to 8:00 p.m. ET

Session V

Readings:

- *Paradiso, Cantos 1-17*

Discussion Questions:

1. Canto 4.22.27: Why is the question as to whether our souls return to stars “more poisonous” than the question about divine justice?
 - a. 4.28: What does it mean to be most “in-god-ed”?
 - b. 4.64-78: What’s at stake in Dante’s second doubt, about violence limiting what those with a good will deserve?
2. Canto 13.103-108: Why is kingly wisdom the highest kind of wisdom?

Tuesday, April 7, 2026

6:00 to 8:00 p.m. ET

Session VI

Readings:

- *Paradiso, Cantos 18-33*

Discussion Questions:

1. Canto 19.70-81: What do you make of the argument justifying the condemnation of good human beings simply because they have never encountered Christ?
 - a. 19.103-108: What does it mean to “have faith in Christ” before He was born?
 - b. 20.67.69: Dante includes a Trojan man, Rhiphaeus, among those in the eagle’s eye in heaven. If a Trojan could “have faith in Christ” in some sense, and go to Paradise, why not Virgil?
2. Canto 28.16-21: What does it mean to describe God as a single point of light? What does this say about God as He relates to Creation?