Why would anyone want to spend a whole semester studying John Milton’s writings and their seventeenth-century contexts? The answer is the extraordinary scope and utterly brilliant quality of the writing in often very demanding but exquisite poetry as well as in passionate prose. This scope includes explorations in ethics, politics, and theology on topics that should still be of central concern to us.

John Milton left Cambridge as an orthodox member of the Church of England. He died (in 1674) as one who had rejected this church, defended the execution of its governor (Charles I), and generated a theological system which included a dense cluster of positions which where startlingly “heretical” in terms not only of the magisterial Reformation but also of Catholic traditions. His unfinished treatise on *Christian Doctrine* begins with a statement which sets up the inquiry pursued in this seminar: “If I were to say that I had focused my studies principally upon Christian doctrine because nothing else can so effectually wipe away those two repulsive afflictions, tyranny and superstition, from human life and the human mind, I should show that I had been concerned not for religion but for life’s well being.” As both this statement and the title of this class suggest, poetry, politics, and theology are inextricably bound together in Milton’s work. We aim to read much of the poetry and areas of the prose that will provide a rich sense of his theological and political reflections and enable us to have well-informed discussions about the complex relations between the great poems and his evolving theology. For Milton’s approaches to theology, ecclesiology, and politics belong to a revolutionary moment in which unprecedented thoughts and practices emerged in England. How did Milton and his writing respond to the defeat of the revolution and the restoration of Crown, Church of England, episcopacy, and the attempt to suppress nonconforming groups? There has been a strong tendency in recent Milton scholarship to revise the Whig version of Milton into one that fits the narratives of secular postmodernity, and some people taking this class may find it offers opportunities to interrogate some of these grand stories.

It will be helpful to read a competent biography on Milton before this class: I suggest Gordon Campbell and Thomas Corns, *John Milton: Life, Work, and Thought*. Because we will be reading substantial, complex works, the more Milton you read before class the better. The set text (required) is *The Complete Prose and Essential Poetry of John Milton* edited by John Kerrigan and others (Random House). Read *Comus, Lycidas, and Paradise Lost* together with the divorce tracts over the long vacation.