

INTRODUCTION TO RELIGION

Course Description

If you pay attention, questions of religion are everywhere: from relatively mundane controversies (why do Starbucks holiday cups make the news every year?) to the most essential and far-reaching debates of our time (including healthcare, human rights, and climate change). This course guides students toward a richer and more critically-informed understanding of the nature of “religion” as a category, the diversity of religions, and the intersection between religion and other dimensions of human experience.

This course has three parts. In Part one, students are introduced to the discipline of religious studies and its key terms and concepts (e.g. myth, ritual, sacred/profane, authority, practice). This section presses students to think about how we determine something to be “religion” and the stakes that are involved in that determination. After establishing this foundation, Part Two focuses on “religious literacy,” contextualizing and outlining the basics of the world’s major religions. Finally, Part Three introduces major questions and areas of inquiry in the discipline, making a case for why the study of religion is so important today.

Learning Objectives

- Students will gain facility with key concepts in the study of religion and become familiar with major theoretical approaches of the discipline.
- Students will learn the basic beliefs, practices, and historical contexts of major world religions alongside an awareness of the diversity that exists even within a single tradition.
- Student will have opportunities to practice critical reflection on how religion is represented in media and popular culture.
- Students will organize and communicate critical analyses in written work.

Assignments & Assessments

- Paper (3-4 pages), due week 5: Invent a Religion
- Research presentation, due week 11: Ancient or Modern Religion
- Final paper (5-6 pages), due during finals

(Overview of Grading)

Materials

All materials available via online learning platform.

Schedule

Part One: What is religion?

Week One: The Study of Religion

Class One: Expectations and Syllabus overview

Class Two: Introduction to the Study of Religion

- Read: Russell McCutcheon, “Introduction” from *Studying Religion: An Introduction*

Week Two: Definitions and Boundaries

Class One: Definitions of Religion

- Read: McCutcheon, Chapter One “What’s in a name?” and Chapter 3 “The Essentials of Religion”

Class Two: Outer bounds

- Read: David Chidester, “The Church of Baseball, the Fetish of Coca-Cola, and the Potlatch of Rock ‘n’ Roll: Theoretical Models for the Study of Religion in American Popular Culture” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 64:4

Week Three: Classification and Taxonomy

Class One: Categories – Reading about cults

- Think about different ways we categorize religions, and bring a list to class

Class Two: Categorical “work”

- Read: McCutcheon, Chapter 2 “The History of Religion”
- Peruse: Pew Religious Landscape Survey: <http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/>

Week Four: Questions of Comparison

Class One: Similarity and Difference

- Read: Houston Smith, “Point of Departure,” from *The World’s Religions: Our Great Wisdom Traditions*
- Read: Stephen Prothero, “Introduction” from *God is Not One*

Class Two: Workshopping First Paper

- Come with a draft of your first paper

Part Two: Religious Literacy

Week Five: Hinduism

Class One: Introduction to Hinduism

Class Two: Hinduism and myth

- Read: Rogerson, “Slippery Words: Myth”
- Read: Creation story (Deming 28), excerpts from Bhagavad Gita

Week Six: Buddhism

Class One: Introduction to Buddhism

Class Two: Buddhism, ethics, and “lived religion”

- Read: Dhammapada, excerpts
- Read: Robert Orsi, “Is the Study of Lived Religion Irrelevant to the World We Live in?”

Week Seven

Class One: Other Indian traditions: Jainism, Sikhism

- William James, excerpts on mysticism

Class Two: Chinese and Japanese Religions

Time in class to start research presentations

Week Eight: Judaism

Class One: Introduction to Judaism

Class Two: Judaism and modernity

- Hannah Miller, “Identity Takeout: How American Jews Made Chinese Food Their Ethnic Cuisine,” *Journal of Popular Culture*

Week Nine: Christianity

Class One: Introduction to Christianity

Class Two: Christianity, individuals and communities

- Read: Excerpts from William James, Emile Durkheim

Week Ten: Islam

Class One: Introduction to Islam

Class Two: Islam, authority, new media

- Anna Piela, “Claiming Religious Authority: Muslim women and new media.” In *Media, Religion and Gender: Key Issues and New Challenges*, edited by Mia Lövhelm, 125-190. New York: Routledge, 2013.

Week Eleven: “Ancient” and “Modern” Religions, “Non-major” Religions

Class One: Presentations

Class Two: Presentations

Part Three: Major Questions in the Study of Religion/Why study religion?

Week Twelve: Science and Religion

Class One: Perspectives on Science and Religion

- “An Overview of the Issues,” in Paul Kurtz, ed., *Science and Religion: Are They Compatible?* (New York: Prometheus, 2003), 11-24.

Class Two: Scientific Religions

- Watch “Dianetics: An Introduction,” on Scientology.org <
http://www.scientology.org/what-is-dianetics/basic-principles-of-scientology/dianetics-understanding-the-mind.html?video-play=dn_intro>

Week Thirteen: Gender and Sexuality

Class One:

- Read: Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Christianity,” *Women in World Religions*
- Read: Aheda Zanetti, “I Created the Burkini to Give Women Freedom,” *The Guardian*

Class Two:

Read:

- Mary Wollstonecraft, “Rational Creatures” (1790)
- Ernestine Rose, “A Defense of Atheism” (1861)
- Elizabeth Cady Stanton, “The Christian Church and Women” (1888)
- Charlotte Perkins Gilman, “His Religion and Hers” (1923)
- Chris Stedman, “A Queer Atheist in the Heart of Mormon Country,” *Religion Dispatches*, June 10, 2013 <<http://religiondispatches.org/a-queer-atheist-in-the-heart-of-mormon-country/>>

Week Fourteen: Religion and Politics

Class One: Religion and Politics, past and present

- Read: Pew Research Center, “Many Countries Favor Specific Religions, Officially or Unofficially”

Class Two: Religion and Politics in the United States

- Read: Stephen Prothero, *Nation of Religions*, 1-19
- Come with a news article that relates to questions of religion and politics

Week Fifteen

Class One:

Class Two: