Religion 120 – Introduction to the Study of Religion  
Maxwell Hall: Room 108  
Mondays & Wednesdays from 2:15 to 3:35 PM  
Instructor: Robert M. Ruehl  
Office Hours: Pages Cafe (Bird Library) on Wednesdays from 12:30 to 1:30 P.M.

Scope  
This course will concentrate on “religion” as a complex word without one specific definition. To use figurative language, “religion” will be a geographical space in which we wander examining its hills and valleys, plants and bushes, insects and animals, and the various aspects of its different terrains through the use of different theories about religion. This inevitably will culminate in various perspectives about what religion may be or might mean to a specific person.

Purpose of the class  
To encounter this varied landscape of “religion,” we will need various tools for navigation. The course’s primary goal, then, will be to develop individual competencies to talk about and/or analyze “religion” through the deployment of different critical concepts and methodological approaches.

General Approach  
Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance by Robert M. Pirsig will be our religious landscape. While this book has an odd title, it actually focuses on a more common problem: a parent recovering from a mental illness attempting to rebuild or reestablish family relations. While he travels with his son and two friends, the narrator fears his mental illness is returning; it haunts him throughout his journey. Within his narrative are serious concerns about life and quality. This will allow us to think about the word “religion” in relation to bodies, sensations, love, movement, space, daily concerns, hope, and suffering—to name just a few themes. Instead of taking a sacred text from one of the “major” world religions or from other “minor” religious traditions, we will use Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance as if it were a sacred text. For this semester, it will be our stand-in religious text guiding us through the possibilities of what “religion” may mean. The class also will watch various films discussing religion and religious themes throughout the semester.

Hypothesis  
I begin this class with a different perspective of what “religion” may mean, and it will be up to us to test this hypothesis and to question it throughout. Our initial starting point will be this: Religion is oriented toward enhancing the quality of life while being aware of where we are and who we are while simultaneously always working toward what can be and a new, more joyous, serene self. With this broad definition, we enter “religion” through bodies in various lived realities, and these embodiments use different words and/or languages to describe their lived realities. This will help us to keep “religion” grounded in the practical world that is filled with joys, sorrows, fears, and hopes. By grounding the term “religion” in the concrete realm of embodiment and quality, it will allow us to concentrate more specifically on how “religion” can aid us in thinking about the future we are working toward in terms of the “possible,” the “plausible,” and the most “desirable.” In this way, “religion” partially becomes a way of speaking desires for a better life.
This course is worth a total of 100 points.

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(1) Reading Posts on Blackboard. These are worth a total of 30 points (or 30% of your final grade). Before the start of each class, you are to post your own thoughts on the assigned chapter (or one of the chapters when we have two chapters for a class) or to respond to the post of another student in the class. This is to be more than you liked the reading or the post. Your enjoyment or lack of enjoyment should be your initial response that leads you to ask, “What did I enjoy/dislike about the chapter/post?” For example, when this part of the chapter or aspect of the chapter is identified, clearly state what pulled you in or what made the reading tedious for you. Clearly articulate what you think about this aspect and what it means for you. Finally, state what difference this makes for the study of the text in relation to religion. This is just one instance of how to approach the posts if you are having difficulty. Below is a concrete example.

Example: I enjoyed the spatial relations exhibited in today’s reading. They helped to reveal how space is not a static entity, but a constantly re-negotiated part of life. This can help us to think about religion along the lines of space and the dynamics of space, which helps us to redirect attention to the interaction of bodies in a lived situation instead of on beliefs as the common denominator of religion. This different view may help to diminish the tensions between the beliefs of different religions and their doctrines by keeping our attention on how people try to make their spaces more livable.

Preferably, these posts should be between approximately 70 and 100 words in length. Try to make them concise, clear, and expressive of your concerns with the text. The focus of these posts is to display your engagement with the readings, to help you prepare for class discussions, and to prepare you for your final paper. Make them relevant to your own concerns. Correct any spelling and punctuation mistakes prior to submitting your posts. These are submitted assignments and should be treated as such, so do not plagiarize; if for some reason you feel the need to bring in an outside source, make sure you cite it.

I will check these posts to make sure they are done, but I will not respond to them. They are part of a process that allows you to engage your fellow students. If you have posted your thoughts, you will get a (+) for completing it. If you fail to post your
response by the beginning of class, you will get a (-) for that day. Assume your posts are sufficient for a (+) grade unless I speak with you personally.

(2) Presentation/Leading Class Discussion. This is worth **15 points** (or 15% of your final grade). You will sign up for a specific day to open our discussion of the assigned chapter. You are expected to address what you believe are the key components of the chapter explaining why they are relevant for the study of religion. This is meant to give you the opportunity to think about religion and to present your views to others. This should take about 5 minutes of class time (at most 10 minutes). You may use PowerPoint or note cards. The presentation should help to offer the class a path to go down, so try to end your presentation with a series of three to five questions you would like us to consider for the class session.

(3) Final Paper. This is worth **20 points** (or 20% of your final grade). This is to be a 3 to 4 page paper defining religion. The word count for the text should be between 950 and 1,240 words. Use 12 point, Times New Roman, and 1 inch margins all around. This paper is to be an elaboration of what you have come to think religion is after taking this class and reading *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. This is not a research paper, yet it is more than a summation of the course. Allow your posts to help you think through what religion is for you. Allow the readings and our class discussions to also help you. This is to be posted on Blackboard by 1:00 PM on the last day of our class (Wednesday, December 7, 2011). The grading criteria follows.

**General rubric for grading papers** (copied from Agnes Scott College. See cft.agnesscott.edu/.../AnApproachtoWritingPaperComments.doc)

A  A paper that reflects deep and precise engagement of the material. The thesis is clear, pointed, and insightful, the argument well organized, and the analysis skillfully put forward. **The style is not only error-free, but it is powerful, subtle, and engaging to the reader.** An “A” paper takes its reader into consideration; it is compelling and exciting to read and provides the reader with a sense of discovery.

B  A paper that reflects knowledge of the material organized around a clear and insightful thesis. The argument develops the thesis clearly and coherently and is based on skillful analysis of the text. **Few lapses in mechanics or style distract the reader.** A “B” paper might also be an A paper as described above, but marred by serious problems in one or more key areas, e.g., there is a gap in the argument, the introduction is misleading, or the argument is not explicit enough.

C  A solid, competent paper that has a thesis and argument, but that could reflect deeper, more precise knowledge of the material. The thesis may be unclear or trivial; the evidence sketchy or not convincingly analyzed; the argument not coherently organized. Surface errors in mechanics and sentence structure may obscure the meaning. It is possible for a “C” essay to have good ideas, but **serious problems in organization, analysis of evidence, or surface errors.**
D A paper lacking a real thesis or developed argument. Little or no evidence is provided or analyzed. Surface errors with mechanics and/or sentence structure may make it difficult to understand.

F A paper that falls significantly short of meeting all objectives. Thesis, argument, and analysis of evidence are lacking or significantly insufficient. Little understanding of the material is evident. Surface errors are distracting and obscure meaning.

(4) Paper Response Post on Blackboard. This is worth 5 points (5% of your final grade). Following the same guidelines as your reading posts, read through one of your fellow student’s papers, and post a comment about their paper. Again, this is more than stating your liked the paper; it should critically engage a point in the text with which you agreed or disagreed. These should be between 75 and 100 words in length. They are to be posted no later than midnight of the day after the final class (midnight December 8, 2011).

(5) Attendance. This is worth 15 points (15% of your final grade). Each class is worth approximately ½ a point. In each class, an attendance sheet will be passed around for you to sign. Only you can sign in for yourself. Signing in for another constitutes cheating. Be on time.

(6) Participation. This is worth 15 points (or 15% of your final grade). You are expected to come prepared for class and ready to discuss the text. This means that you are to read the text before class and that you need to keep up with the readings. While I’m aware that some students feel uncomfortable talking in class, the input of every student helps to add to the discussions. Let your voice be heard! Remember that missing class means that you aren’t participating: a missed class leads to missed participation points.

Structure of the Class

The class is based on the expectation that we will learn from each other. I will learn from you, you will learn from me, and you will learn from your fellow students. Open communication is important to learning. Never hesitate to ask a question or to contribute to the conversation. There is no wrong question. I want us to develop a learning environment that is safe, respectful, and open to free discussion. We learn both through our successes and our failures. Please be respectful and courteous. Because students too frequently surf the internet, etc. and distract others and themselves, no computers are allowed in class. Cell phone use and texting are not allowed in class, so please turn off your cell phones prior to the start of class; if you are caught texting, you will be asked to leave class.

Class Schedule

Week One
Monday, August 29 Introduction to the class
Wednesday, August 31 Chapter 1
Week Two
Monday, September 5
Wednesday, September 7

*****LABOR DAY: NO CLASSES*****

Chapter 2

Week Three
Monday, September 12
Wednesday, September 14

Chapter 3
Chapter 4

Week Four
Monday, September 19
Wednesday, September 21

Chapter 5
Chapter 6

Week Five
Monday, September 26
Wednesday, September 28

Chapter 7
Chapters 8 & 9

Week Six
Monday, October 3
Wednesday, October 5

Chapter 10
Chapter 11

Week Seven
Monday, October 10
Wednesday, October 12

Chapters 12 & 13
Chapter 14

Week Eight
Monday, October 17
Wednesday, October 19

Chapter 15
Chapter 16

Week Nine
Monday, October 24
Wednesday, October 26

Chapter 17
Chapter 18

Week Ten
Monday, October 31
Wednesday, November 2

Chapter 19
Chapters 20 & 21

Week Eleven
Monday, November 7
Wednesday, November 9

Chapter 22
Chapters 23 & 24

Week Twelve
Monday, November 14
Wednesday, November 16

Chapter 25
Chapter 26

****NO CLASSES THIS WEEK (NOV. 20-27: THANKSGIVING BREAK****
Disabilities

The Office of Disability Services (ODS) is the designated campus office that facilitates access for students with documented disabilities to programs and activities at Syracuse University. If you are a student with a disability and plan to request accommodations, it is important that you contact the Office of Disability Services. Students with disabilities may choose to self-disclose at any time. However, in order to ensure sufficient time to arrange for and provide auxiliary aids and services, requests for accommodations should be made as early as possible. Please feel free to contact the Office of Disability Services at (315) 443-4498 or (315) 443-1371 TDD, to speak with an ODS Counselor regarding any questions or concerns. See their webpage at http://disabilityservices.syr.edu/.

Academic Integrity

The Syracuse University Academic Integrity Policy holds students accountable for the integrity of the work they submit. Students should be familiar with the Policy and know that it is their responsibility to learn about instructor and general academic expectations with regard to proper citation of sources in written work. The policy also governs the integrity of work submitted in exams and assignments as well as the veracity of signatures on attendance sheets and other verifications of participation in class activities. Serious sanctions can result from academic dishonesty of any sort. For more information and the complete policy, see the Academic Integrity Office website at http://academicintegrity.syr.edu/.

Week Thirteen
Monday, November 28 Chapters 27 & 28
Wednesday, November 30 Chapter 29

Week Fourteen
Monday, December 5 Chapter 30
Wednesday, December 7 Chapters 31 & 32