Introduction to the Study of Religion
REL 120
Fall 2011

Teaching Team
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Opening
What do we talk about when we talk about religion? This course explores this question via a variety of texts, traditions, and theories as we consider what religion is, what religion does, how religion works, and how religion affects human lives: how the textures of everyday life are woven by threads of the sacred and the secular, as humans contemplate living questions of existence, ethics, meaning, and transcendence.

Ways and Means
Studying religion is a critical undertaking that entails a journey through some of the vital, human questions religion responds to as well as the responses themselves. We will work from the bottom up, from the inside out, across times and traditions, cultures and disciplines, encountering along the way a variety of dynamics, documents, beliefs, practices, and expressions and developing the hermeneutic tools necessary to interpret them. The course materials, discussions, and assignments work together in the service of the course’s learning objectives:
(1) to understand better the nature, diversity, and power of individual and collective religious expressions in historical and contemporary contexts;
(2) to think more deeply and critically about religious experiences and their forms of expression and modes of interpretation;
(3) to recognize and respect the difficulties and possibilities inherent in a disciplined study of religion utilizing a diversity of approaches and methods;
(4) to improve your analytic abilities to read actively, to think critically, and to write successfully;
(5) to develop a more informed understanding of and appreciation for the humanities and their modes of critical inquiry.

Texts
Malory Nye, Religion: The Basics (2nd edition)
Angela of Foligno, Memorial
Euripides, Bacchae
Elie Wiesel, Night
Annie Dillard, Holy the Firm
Texts by Luce Irigaray, Georges Bataille, and John Caputo as well as additional materials will be available through Blackboard.
Requirements

Attendance
Your TA and I expect you to be prepared for, to attend, and to participate in all class meetings. Your final grade will drop 3 percentage points (e.g., from 90 to 87) for each absence after the second. Absences may be excused in documented cases of recognized religious holiday, official university business, or critical and unforeseeable emergency.

Active participation
Active participation begins before you enter the classroom with careful readings of the texts. Spend time working through each text, marking important passages, jotting down questions, and engaging the author as a conversation partner. Preparation plays a crucial role in participation. In class, comment on the passages you marked, ask the questions you jotted down, and engage me and your fellow students as conversation partners. Simply showing up is not enough. Read everything, and come ready to interact with the texts and with one another. Remember that this course is ours, not only mine or yours, so we are all responsible for its success.

Blog
The blog offers an additional forum and technology for critical reading, thinking, and writing. Each week by Friday at 4 p.m., you will post to the course blog on Blackboard (1) a comment that relates, reflects, or refracts the materials and topics that our course explores and (2) a response to at least one other comment. These comments and responses should substantially contribute to our ongoing discussions, transposing class conversations into cyberspace.

Reviews
The three reviews (a.k.a. exams) give you opportunities to demonstrate your understanding of the texts, concepts, and figures covered in the course. We will ask you to respond to questions that look for in-depth knowledge of as well as for comparative analyses of texts, concepts, and figures. All reviews will be cumulative and comprehensive. The final review may not be rescheduled.

Grading
Active participation 15%
Blog 15%
Review #1 15%
Review #2 20%
Final review 35%

Late work will not be accepted. Make-up reviews may be granted in documented cases of recognized religious holiday, official university business, or critical and unforeseeable emergency. No extra credit will be given. Your continued enrollment in this course will indicate your understanding of and agreement to its goals, policies, and requirements.

Reading, Thinking, Writing
Critical reading, thinking, and writing are probably the most important and most applicable skills you can learn in college. Because they are skills, they require practice, which means that you must learn and practice them to achieve proficiency and,
ultimately, mastery. The flip side is that because they are skills, they are learnable and can be mastered if you are willing to devote the necessary time and effort. Thinking of reading, thinking, and writing critically as investments requiring large initial deposits but providing substantial return with interest on those deposits.

Office Hours
Office hours provide opportunities to seek assistance, ask questions, clarify issues, and extend class discussions. Your TA and I strongly encourage you to use them as a resource, especially if you are having difficulties—which are common, since the texts we are reading are dense and demanding. Coming to office hours will demonstrate your interest and participation in this course. You can also email us anytime.

Individual Concerns
If you believe that you need academic accommodations for a disability, please contact the Office of Disability Services (http://disabilityservices.syr.edu) for an appointment to discuss your needs and to request accommodations. ODS is responsible for coordinating disability-related accommodations and will, as appropriate, issue accommodation authorization letters to students with documented disabilities. Since accommodations may require early planning and are not provided retroactively, please contact ODS as soon as possible and meet with me to review those accommodations.

Personal Conduct
Your TA and I think of a class as an academic community in which any community member’s actions affect other members. We expect you to conduct yourself respectfully and responsibly as a member of this community. Doing so includes being prepared for class, attending class from beginning to end, listening when another speaks, tolerating personal and intellectual differences, discontinuing the use of electronic devices, refraining from eating, and generally abstaining from any action not productively related to this course. Anyone whose personal conduct deviates from these standards may be excused from class for the day.

Academic Integrity
Academic integrity forms the foundation of any academic community. As a member of this community, it is imperative that you exhibit honesty and integrity in your academic life. Cheating, in any form and to any degree, is a dishonest act that is an affront to this community, and we will not tolerate it. Cheating includes giving or receiving aid when prohibited, plagiarism, fraud, falsification, collusion, or any related act of deception or dishonesty. A student who commits such an act will receive an XF grade in this course and will be reported to the Academic Integrity Office (http://academicintegrity.syr.edu).

Words for Thought
“We’re dealing with the important things here. Our faith, our health. Who we are and how we live.” —Don DeLillo

“Always a matter of surprise, religion is, I believe, most interesting where it is least obvious.” —Mark C. Taylor
Schedule of Readings and Assignments
30 Aug—Introduction
1 Sept—Nye, “Religion” and “Gender"

6 Sept—Angela of Foligno, *Memorial*
8 Sept—Angela of Foligno, *Memorial*

13 Sept—Angela of Foligno, *Memorial*
15 Sept—Irigaray, “La Mystérique”

20 Sept—Irigaray, “Divine Women”
22 Sept—Review #1

27 Sept—Nye, “Culture” and “Ritual”
29 Sept—Euripides, *Bacchae*

4 Oct—Euripides, *Bacchae*
6 Oct—Euripides, *Bacchae*

11 Oct—Euripides, *Bacchae*
13 Oct—Bataille, “Transgression”

20 Oct—Review #2

25 Oct—Nye, “Power” and “Belief”
27 Oct—Wiesel, *Night*

1 Nov—Wiesel, *Night*
3 Nov—Wiesel, *Night*

8 Nov—Wiesel, *Night*
10 Nov—Caputo, “The Love of God”

17 Nov—Nye, “Text” and “Contemporary Religions”

22–24 Nov—Thanksgiving break

29 Nov—Dillard, *Holy the Firm*
1 Dec—Dillard, *Holy the Firm*

6 Dec—Dillard, *Holy the Firm*
8 Dec—Conclusion

16 Dec—Final review, 8–10 a.m.