REL 120 Introduction to the Study of Religion
Spring 2015
Tuesday/Thursday 5:00-6:20pm
Instructor: Courtney O’Dell-Chaib
HL 514 Office Hours: Tuesday/Thursday, 3:30pm-4:30pm and by appointment
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What do we talk about when we talk about religion? In this course we will explore this question through a variety of texts, traditions, and theories. As a class we will think critically about what religion is and how it is engaged in the multifaceted lives of humans around the world.

This course will consider diverse ways of being in the world, of which religious beliefs/traditions/practices/experiences/ethics are intrinsically significant, through different kinds of written expression. Together we will consider an ethnography, a novel, an autobiography, and a non-fiction nature writing piece to ask how our authors speak to complex questions such as: what does it mean to be human? How might humans find meaning in their lives? How should humans interact with the material world within which we are enmeshed? What do some religious experiences convey about how to live a good, ethical, or valuable life? After each primary text we will consider pieces of theory that demonstrate how religion scholars might reflect upon the themes and questions posed by our primary authors.

Since our class is an exercise in openness towards learning about different ways of being in the world, some of which at times might make us uncomfortable, it is important that we cultivate empathy and patience in our classroom. We all come to the course with personal beliefs, experiences, and traditions. Considering this inherent diversity, inclusive and respectful language is essential to our course.

Learning Objectives:

Through our reading assignments, provocative exams, and class discussion it is my hope that this course will engage you in these objectives:

1) to understand better the nature, diversity, and power of individual and collective religious expressions in historical and contemporary contexts;
2) develop an understanding of religious traditions, practices, and spiritualities as dynamic and evolving;
3) to think more deeply and critically about religious experience and its modes of expression and forms of interpretation;
4) to improve your abilities to read actively, to think analytically, and to write compellingly
**Required Texts:**

Stephanie Wellen Levine, *Mystics, Mavericks, and Merrymakers: An Intimate Journey Among Hasidic Girls*  
Louise Erdrich, *The Painted Drum*  
Wole Soyinka, *Aké: The Years of Childhood*  
Ellen Meloy, *Eating Stone: Imagination and the Loss of the Wild*  
Additional readings found on Blackboard

**Assignments and Grading:**

**Text Engagement and Participation**

This is a reading intensive course that will only function well if you come to class having read the material and ready to engage in discussion. Your physical presence in class is not enough. A **significant portion of your grade will be based on how you prepare and participate in communal discussion.** Coming to class without closely reading our assigned texts is **unacceptable.** Read the texts carefully and come with your questions, concerns, and connections.

No laptop, tablet, or smartphone use during our class time. Bring material copies of our reading to class.

I expect that you will be on time to class and will stay for the entirety of our class time unless you’ve met with me.

**Absences**

You will be allowed **two unexcused absences** and **any absences after two** (that are not related to critical emergencies, documented cases of religious holiday, and official university business) will **drop your final grade by three points** (ex. from 100-97).

**Group Reading Journal**

On the second week of classes I will pass out journals that you will share between partners or a group of three. Each Monday I will email out to the class a question for journal reflection. **It will be up to your group to take turns responding to the journal question each week.** On certain Thursdays, you will be asked to hand it in to me so I can check-in on your responses. You should read the responses of your group members and feel welcome to be in conversation with them as you write your own response. These journals will give you the opportunity to do some reflection...
on themes in the course as well as your experiences reading the material. 

You will receive one journal reflection grade for the entire group.

Exams

You will have three in-class written exams that will give you the opportunity to practice and improve your critical reading, thinking, and writing abilities by articulating your understandings of and responses to texts, concepts, and cases we examine. I will provide study questions leading into the exams.

Our final exam will be comprehensive and will give you the opportunity to demonstrate your cumulative understandings of our course themes as a whole.

Participation 15%
Journals 25%
Exams 30%
Final Exam 30%

Please Note: No late work will be accepted.

Academic Integrity

Academic integrity forms the foundation of any learning community, so it is imperative that you exhibit honesty and integrity as a member of this community. Cheating, in any form and to any degree, is an affront to this community that will not be tolerated. Cheating includes giving or receiving aid when prohibited, plagiarism, fraud, falsification, collusion, or any related act of deception or dishonesty. If you commit such an act, you will receive an XF grade for this course and will be reported to the Office of Academic Integrity. For more information, see the Academic Integrity Politics and Procedures available at (http://academicintegrity.syr.edu).

Learning Accommodations

If you think you might need accommodations for a learning disability, please contact the Office of Disability Studies (http://disabilityservices.syr.edu) to discuss your needs and the process for requesting accommodations. The Office of Disability Services is responsible for coordinating disability-related accommodations and will, as appropriate, issue accommodation authorization letters to students with documented disabilities. Since accommodations may required early planning and generally are not provided retroactively, contact the Office of Disability Services and discuss your situation with me as soon as possible.
Inclusive Language Policy

It is expected in this course that all participants use inclusive language in all verbal and written assignments especially with respect to humanity, cultures, nationalities, ethnicities, races, and religions, with regard to characteristics such as sex, gender, sexual identities, social class, age, and dis/abilities. We are all a part of creating a space for dialogue and engagement where the importance of differences within relationships are engaged in a substantive manner. One of the goals of this class is to think carefully about the words we use and the images, metaphors, and linguistic ideas that we are invoking. In keeping the vision of thinking thoughtfully about language, here are some resources for further reflection on the importance of inclusive language:

Related Links:

Guidelines for Gender-Fair Use of Language, from the website of National Council of Teachers of English.
http://www.ncte.org/positions/statements/genderfairuseoflang

Schedule of Readings and Assignments

January 13th. Introduction
January 15th. Nye, “Religion” and “Gender”

January 20th. Stephanie Levine, Mystics, Mavericks, and Merrymakers
January 22nd. Levine, Mystics, Mavericks, and Merrymakers

January 27th. Levine, Mystics, Mavericks, and Merrymakers

February 3rd. Luce Irigaray, “Divine Women” (BB)
February 5th. exam
*Turn in Reading Journal

February 10th – Nye, “Culture” and “Power”
February 12th. Louise Erdrich, The Painted Drum

February 17th. Erdrich, The Painted Drum
February 19th. Erdrich, The Painted Drum

February 24th. Erdrich, The Painted Drum
February 26th. Selections from Mending the Circle: A Native American Repatriation
Guide, Film clips- *In the Light of Reverence*


**March 5th.** exam

**March 10th.** Spring Break

**March 12th.** Spring Break

**March 17th.** Nye, “Ritual” and “Belief”

**March 19th.** Wole Soyinka, *Aké*

**March 24th.** Soyinka, *Aké*

**March 26th.** Soyinka, *Aké*

**March 31st.** Soyinka, *Aké*

**April 2nd.** S. Brent Plate, “The Skin of Religion: Aesthetic Mediations of the Sacred,”

*Turn in Reading Journal*

**April 7th.** Jonathan Z. Smith, “Religion, Religions, Religious”

**April 9th.** exam

**April 14th.** Nye, “Contemporary Religions”

**April 16th.** Ellen Meloy, *Eating Stone: Imagination and the Loss of the Wild*

**April 21st.** Meloy, *Eating Stone*

**April 23rd.** Meloy, *Eating Stone*

**April 28th.** Last Day of Class- Bring Reading Journals for Final Grade

**Final Exam:** April 30th 5:15-7:15pm Shafer 203