

## Introduction to the Study of Religion

REL 120 | Fall 2017 | MW 15:45–17:05

Syllabus

### Who is teaching our course?

Professor William Robert

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### What is our course about?

That's a good question. Our work this semester is to find out, together. How will we study religion? Our course takes a radical approach to this question. Our approach is radical in multiple ways.

(1) It's an approach of *not knowing in advance*. Our approach is of discovery, not digestion. We will not simply digest others' past responses, following worn paths and using prefab materials. In our course, we will discover how we study religion: what paths we take, what methods we use, what terms we employ, what questions we ask, what responses we offer. And not knowing in advance means that I don't know either. It means that my preexisting responses don't take precedence over the ones we discover together. It means that all of us—me, too—are learning together.

(2) It's an approach of *questioning*. Our course is all about a question—just one: *what do we talk about when we talk about religion?* Our entire course, all our work together this semester, is about responding, about discovering our responses, to this question. It's about exploring possible responses, trying them out, seeing how they work, modifying responses that might work, deepening ones that do work, abandoning ones that don't work, trying new ones. It's about using responses to ask better questions. And it's about continuing to ask real questions. In our course, we will continually ask: How does religion work? What does religion do? Why does religion matter?

(3) It's an approach of *real learning*. In our course, we will learn how to study religion by studying it. We will learn by doing: by doing it ourselves. Our class is a learning laboratory. It's a live experiment in learning, happening in real time. Our learning is about *how* as much as about *what*. In our course, we're as interested in how we talk about religion, how we study religion, as what we talk about and what we study when we talk about and study religion. And *how* depends on *who, when, where, why*. It depends on us.

(4) It's an approach that *takes its time*. Real learning takes time. We have to discover it, little by little. We have to experiment, to figure out what works and what doesn't. In our course, we take time, or make time, for learning. We give ourselves time to explore, to investigate, to discover, to learn. To do so, we will focus on 3 case studies. We will spend our time studying 3 texts—really studying them, in real depth, in multiple ways. We will read other texts only to help us study our 3 texts: to help us study religion by studying them. In our course, we will read very little. But we will read it very, very well.

(5) It's an approach that is *performative*. Our 3 texts are performance-texts. So performance is woven into our course's fabric. And we will use performance as a way to learn. We will use performance as an analytic tool: as a way of studying religion. Especially in our course, performance is a vital tool that can help us to understand religion's questions, terms, texts, contexts, operations, effects, significances. It's a tool that can engender kinds of learning that would not happen otherwise.

How will we study religion? What do we talk about when we talk about religion? Let's be radical: let's find out. That—finding out, together—is what our course is about.

### **How will our course work?**

Our course, with its radical approach, is not like other courses. It's an adventure, of real learning. But real learning takes real work. We—all of us—will have to work together, to learn together. At heart, our course is a series of conversations: among our course materials and among ourselves. These conversations are live opportunities for interactive learning, with as many conversation partners as possible.

In our course, that's our work. It's *our* work. Because our course is *ours*. Its success is our responsibility. Its success depends on our working, really working, together. For our course to succeed, we have to come to class ready to work, together. In class, we have to do the work: the work of learning, together. And we have to be up for the adventure of real learning. Think of our course as an adventure in rock climbing. We're in it together. We're tied to each other. We have to work together to make it to the top. Either we all make it, working together, or we don't make it.

**How will we orient ourselves?**

In our course, we take the following statements as among our guiding principles.

- (1) None of us knows everything.
- (2) Each of us is here primarily to learn.
- (3) We learn with our whole bodies.
- (4) Each of us can contribute to our learning—our own and others’.
- (5) Learning requires differences.
- (6) Questions are usually more illuminating than responses.
- (7) Responses are primarily ways of asking better next questions.

**How will we approach our study of religion?**

In our course, we will become scholars, studying religion. So we will adopt a scholarly approach to our work. Doing so calls for adopting the following perspectives.

**Reflexive awareness**

Reflexive awareness means being aware of our assumptions, convictions, and values, shaped by our historical and cultural locations. These assumptions, convictions, and values affect how we understand religion. Reflexive awareness also means recognizing that studying religion can be unsettling. It can unsettle our assumptions, convictions, and values. Other religions are other ways of imagining and inhabiting the world: other ways of being and doing. To study them responsibly, we must bracket judgment and engage their otherness.

**Imaginative sympathy**

Imaginative sympathy means taking seriously the world of a religious practitioner. It means assuming that a religious thought, activity, or object carries real meaning for a religious practitioner. Doing so involves imaginatively crawling inside this practitioner’s world and understanding how, for this practitioner, this world makes sense. It requires that we take seriously assumptions, convictions, values, stories, materials, rituals, and identities very different from ours.

**Critical distance**

Critical distance means raising questions that a religious practitioner might not raise about his or her or hir religion. What are a religion’s acknowledged and unacknowledged assumptions, convictions, and values? How does a religious practitioner adopt them? What effects does a religious idea, activity, or object have on a religious practitioner—and on a society? In what ways is a religion meaningful for its practitioners? How do its materials and practices conceive of beings (botanical, animal, human, divine, and otherwise) and their interactions? What does a religion hold as fundamental to human well-being? Critical questions like these, and the issues they raise, are ones we should keep in mind as we study religion.

### **What will we read?**

Euripides, *Bakkhai* (9781783199150)

Peter Shaffer, *Equus* (9780743287302)

Bess Wohl, *Small Mouth Sounds* (9780822234012)

Additional texts will be available on Blackboard. Be sure to bring to class a paper copy of each text we are discussing that day.

### **What skills will we develop?**

Critical reading, thinking, and writing skills are probably the most valuable skills you can learn in college. Because they are skills, they are learnable. But like any skill, they require practice. They can be learned, and ultimately mastered, if you are willing to devote time and effort to practicing them. Think of these skills as investments requiring large initial deposits but providing substantial returns with interest on those deposits.

### **What do we hope to gain from our course?**

All of our work together will be to realize our course's learning goals:

- (1) to understand and articulate how religion works, what religion does, and why religion matters in individual and collective, past and present contexts;
- (2) to analyze and interpret religious materials and experiences and their forms of expression using a variety of approaches and methods;
- (3) to recognize and describe the difficulties and possibilities of studying religion as a mode of humanistic inquiry;
- (4) to develop and demonstrate critical and self-critical habits of reading, thinking, and writing.

### **Any tips for success in our course?**

- (1) Read our course texts thoroughly, closely, and carefully.
- (2) Read them again.
- (3) Participate in our class meetings.
- (4) Ask questions.
- (5) Reread the texts.
- (6) Participate more in our class meetings.
- (7) Ask more questions.
- (8) Reread the texts again.

### **Any words of wisdom?**

"It's really important to get somehow into the mind and make it move somewhere it has never moved before. Given whatever material we're going to talk about, and we all know what it is, how can we move within it in a way we've never moved before, mentally? That seems like the most exciting thing to do with your head." (Anne Carson)

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Procedures

### **What kind of community will we foster?**

Our class is a community, in which any member's actions affect other members. As members of this community, we share responsibility for making our community the best it can be. To do so, we commit to the following communal responsibilities.

#### **Punctual attendance**

We will be on time for and attend every class meeting from beginning to end. Attendance is a crucial component of learning, since it gives us opportunities to engage course materials and each other. Each absence after the fourth will lower your course grade by 60 points. In our course, we do not distinguish between excused and unexcused absences.

#### **Active participation**

Participation depends on preparation. Before class, spend time carefully reading each text, marking important passages, jotting down questions, and engaging the text and its author as conversation partners. Then in class, comment on the passages you marked, ask the questions you jotted down (and others that arise), and engage other class members as conversation partners. Simply showing up is not enough. Participating actively means interacting with texts and with each other in a learning environment of collaborative inquiry and exploration. You should plan on speaking in nearly every class meeting, though you will earn points based on the quality, not the quantity, of your participation in and contributions to our learning.

#### **Shared respect**

We will be respectful and responsible—particularly in this course, whose charged materials require sensitivity. Being respectful and responsible includes preparing for and attending class, listening to others, appreciating differences, refraining from eating and using electronic devices, and abstaining from any activity not productively contributing to our course. Anyone who is not respectful and responsible may be excused from class for the day and/or marked absent.

#### **Academic integrity**

We will uphold academic integrity. Because academic integrity forms the foundation of a learning community, it is absolutely imperative that we be honest and honorable members of this community. You are responsible for understanding academic integrity and for the integrity of your work. Academic dishonesty, in any form and to any degree, is an affront to this community that

we will not tolerate. Academic dishonesty includes giving or receiving aid when prohibited, submitting the same work in more than one course, plagiarism, fraud, falsification, collusion, or any related act of deception or dishonesty. Anyone who commits such an act will fail this course and will be reported to the Office of Academic Integrity, which may level additional sanctions. For more information, see the Academic Integrity Policies and Procedures (<http://class.syr.edu/academic-integrity>).

Staying enrolled in this course will indicate your understanding of and agreement to its approaches, goals, principles, policies, responsibilities, and requirements.

### **What will we do to help ourselves learn and to demonstrate our learning?**

We will engage in the following activities (in addition to active participation) that afford opportunities to deepen and to assess your learning.

#### **Making a case**

In our course, we will consider a wide variety of terms we talk about when we talk about religion. You will have an opportunity, on 1 of 4 possible dates, to make a case for a specific term's significance for studying religion. Working with a partner, you will develop and then present, in 5 minutes, a compelling, oral argument that makes your case (i.e., explains your view). Your presentation's aim is to persuade your classmates to agree with your argument. Making a case combines critical skills of reading, thinking, and communicating with your insights and viewpoint and your ability to articulate them. On each of the designated days, no more than 6 cases may be made.

#### **Performance**

Our study of religion, through plays, highlights that religion is dynamic, performative, interactive, enacted in and through bodies. To realize these dimensions calls for performance. A performance offers you an opportunity, on 1 of 5 possible dates, to study religion by interpreting and enacting a course text. This performance is an interpretive exercise. It requires concentrated study of a text, in contexts, and it demonstrates performance as a way of studying religion that engages our learning goals. You will select a portion (2–3 pages) of a scene from the text we are reading, prepare and perform it for our class, and be prepared to respond to questions about your performance as a textual interpretation. Depending on your scene, you may work alone or with up to 2 partners. On each of the designated days, no more than 5 performances may be given.

#### **Learning log**

The learning log presents opportunities to think and write critically about your learning at different moments in our course. It allows you to think, to think about

your thinking, and to write about both in relation to our course materials. In doing so, the learning log links course content, critical skills, and learning observations. For each learning log entry, you will enter directly in your Blackboard journal (i.e., not post as an attachment) a response (300–400 words) to a particular, pre-distributed prompt. Each learning log entry should respond thoroughly to the prompt, support its claims and conclusions, integrate course readings and discussions, and show reflection, thoughtfulness, and insight. The learning log is 1 learning activity, in 5 parts. To earn points for this learning activity, you must submit 4 of the 5 learning log entries.

#### Learning self-assessment

The learning self-assessment offers an opportunity to reflect on your learning in our course: what and how you have learned and how you have taken responsibility for your learning. For your learning self-assessment, you will enter directly in your Blackboard journal (i.e., not post as an attachment) a report (600–800 words) recounting and evaluating your learning—and your role in it—in our course. Use our course’s learning goals to assess your learning performance. Be sure to mention specific skills and knowledges in relation to specific course goals, materials, and activities. Your self-assessment should include the number of points (out of 60) that you judge best represents your learning performance in our course.

#### Harkness discussion

A Harkness discussion is a cooperative discussion in which everyone contributes, working together to respond to a particular, pre-distributed prompt. Think of it as an interactive laboratory for live learning. In a Harkness discussion, a group manages pace, balance, and order, adjusting when the discussion is not or no longer working. A Harkness discussion involves zooming in and out on texts and topics, supporting assertions with textual references, resolving questions, taking risks, digging for new meanings. It demands preparation and engagement. Because a Harkness discussion is a collective learning activity, each member of a discussion group will earn the same score. Because it depends on collaborative, group interactions, a Harkness discussion may not be made up.

#### Examinations

Examinations are formal, concentrated occasions to practice and improve your critical reading, thinking, and writing abilities. They draw together your learning and your skills of interpretation, comparison, application, and evaluation. Examinations are opportunities to demonstrate your understandings of and uses of texts, terms, concepts, cases, and questions that our course considers. Essay questions selected from pre-distributed lists will comprise the examinations.

## Learning finale

The learning finale is the capstone of your learning in our course. It will offer you a dynamic, interactive way to demonstrate and use your critical skills along with your understandings of and creative insights on the texts, terms, concepts, cases, and questions examined in our course. The learning finale may not be rescheduled.

## How will our learning be assessed and evaluated?

Your assessed opportunities for learning and achievement (i.e., assignments) will comprise your course grade based on the following point values.

Active participation	120
Making a case	60
Performance	90
Learning log	90
Learning self-assessment	60
Harkness discussion #1	100
Harkness discussion #2	120
Examination #1	100
Examination #2	120
Learning finale	<u>160</u>
	800 possible points

Active participation and the learning finale are required. You choose which other learning activities you will do. You may do as many or as few as you choose (though because Harkness discussions and examinations happen simultaneously, you must choose between them). We will post on Blackboard your points earned on learning activities. We will calculate your course grade based on the total number of points you earn, according to the following scale.

		B+	598–611	C+	530–543	D	408–475
A	626–800	B	558–597	C	490–529		
A-	612–625	B-	544–557	C-	476–489	F	0–407

Learning activities are due by 15:45 on the designated dates. Because you have choices about the learning activities you do, we will not accept a learning activity once its due date has passed. Nor will we accept a learning activity that does not follow the directions above. No extra credit will be given.

## What if I will miss a learning activity because of a religious holiday?

You may make up a learning activity missed due to a religious holiday provided that you notify us of your religious holiday through MySlice by 6 September 2017 and



provided that you schedule, before the missed learning activity, to make up the learning activity within 5 days of your religious holiday. For more information, see the Religious Observances Policy ([http://supolicies.syr.edu/emp\\_ben/religious\\_observance.htm](http://supolicies.syr.edu/emp_ben/religious_observance.htm)).

**What if I need an academic adjustment?**

If you think you might need an academic adjustment, please contact the Office of Disability Services (<http://disabilityservices.syr.edu>) to discuss your needs and the process for requesting academic adjustments. The Office of Disability Services is responsible for coordinating disability-related academic adjustments and will, as appropriate, issue an accommodation authorization letter to a student with a documented disability. Since academic adjustments may require early planning and generally are not provided retroactively, contact the Office of Disability Services and discuss your situation with us as soon as possible.

**What if I have a question?**

Office hours provide you with weekly opportunities to extend class discussions, ask questions, or seek assistance. We (our course's teaching team) strongly encourage you to take advantage of these opportunities, especially if you are having difficulties. You're welcome to drop by without an appointment. And you can email us anytime.

## Introduction to the Study of Religion

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Schedule

### What will we do, and when?

This schedule is only preliminary, because our course will be fluid. We will add readings as we go, based on what emerges from our interactions with our course materials and with each other.

Week	Date	Topic	Text	Learning activity
1	28 August	Opening		
	30 August		Malory Nye, "Religion" J.Z. Smith, "Map Is Not Territory"	
2	4 September	Labor day		
	6 September	Case study #1: <i>Bakkhai</i>	Euripides, <i>Bakkhai</i>	
3	11 September		Euripides, <i>Bakkhai</i>	Learning log entry #1
	13 September		Euripides, <i>Bakkhai</i>	Making a case #1
4	18 September		Euripides, <i>Bakkhai</i>	Performance #1
	20 September		Euripides, <i>Bakkhai</i>	Learning log entry #2
5	25 September		Euripides, <i>Bakkhai</i>	Making a case #2
	27 September		Euripides, <i>Bakkhai</i>	Performance #2
6	2 October		Euripides, <i>Bakkhai</i>	
	4 October			Harkness discussion #1 / Examination #1
7	9 October		Critical interlude	Karl Marx, <i>Toward a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right</i>

Week	Date	Topic	Text	Learning activity
7	11 October	Critical interlude	Friedrich Nietzsche, <i>The Gay Science</i> §125	
8	16 October		Sigmund Freud, <i>Civilization and Its Discontents</i> §2	
	18 October	Case study #2: <i>Equus</i>	Peter Shaffer, <i>Equus</i>	Learning log entry #3
9	23 October		Peter Shaffer, <i>Equus</i>	
	25 October		Peter Shaffer, <i>Equus</i>	Making a case #3
10	30 October		Peter Shaffer, <i>Equus</i>	Performance #3
	1 November		Peter Shaffer, <i>Equus</i>	Learning log entry #4
11	6 November		Peter Shaffer, <i>Equus</i>	Making a case #4
	8 November		Peter Shaffer, <i>Equus</i>	Performance #4
12	13 November		Peter Shaffer, <i>Equus</i>	
	15 November			Harkness discussion #2 / Examination #2
Thanksgiving break				
13	27 November	Case study #3: <i>Small Mouth Sounds</i>	Bess Wohl, <i>Small Mouth Sounds</i>	
	29 November		Bess Wohl, <i>Small Mouth Sounds</i>	Learning log entry #5 / Performance #5
14	4 December		Bess Wohl, <i>Small Mouth Sounds</i>	
	6 December	Closing		Learning self-assessment
15	15 December			Learning finale, 10:15–12:15