

## **Introduction to the Study of Religion**

Religion Unbounded  
REL 120 | Spring 2017

### **Who is teaching our course?**

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### **What is our course about?**

What do we talk about when we talk about religion? Our course is about this question and our responses to it. As we shape and reshape our responses, we will ponder other, related questions. How does religion work? What does religion do? Why does religion matter? Is religion necessary? Is religion beneficial? Can religion go too far? What happens if it does?

Underlying these questions is a methodological question: *how?* How do we talk about what we talk about when we talk about religion? And, implicitly, how do we study religion? In our course, we will perform, and reflect on, ways of responding to this methodological question as we respond to our course's guiding question. In other words, in our course we will *do* religious studies.

We will *do* the study of religion by studying religion: in 2 extended case studies, turning on 2 texts from different times and traditions. To do so, we will engage many other texts, many different methods and theories, about religion. So our course will be an engaged, dynamic practicum—a learning experiment in how we study religion—rather than only a distanced consideration of how others have studied religion.

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

Our course materials, discussions, and activities work together in the service of 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 practice critical and self-critical habits of reading, thinking, and writing.

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

Critical reading, thinking, and writing skills are probably the most important and most applicable 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 critical skills as investments that require large initial deposits but that provide substantial returns with interest on those deposits.

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

Euripides, *Bacchae* (9780941051422)

Peter Shaffer, *Equus* (9780743287302)

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

### **How is our course organized?**

At heart, our course is a series of conversations: among our course materials and among ourselves. Our class meetings stage these conversations as live opportunities for interactive learning, with as many conversation partners as possible. Our course is *ours*, not only mine or yours. It is our responsibility to engage in these ongoing conversations with the materials and one another.

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

In our course, we will act as—and 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 mindful 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 the study of religion can be unsettling, since other religions can unsettle our assumptions, convictions, and values. Other religions are other ways of imagining and inhabiting the world: other ways of being and doing, religiously. 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 zir 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 significant and 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.

#### **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) Each of us can contribute to our learning—our own and others'.
- (4) Learning requires differences. Differences are how we learn.
- (5) Questions are usually more illuminating, and more interesting, than answers.
- (6) Answers are primarily ways of asking better next questions.

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

A 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 one another. Each absence after the second will lower your course grade by 20 points. Absences may be excused in documented cases of religious holiday or university affairs, so long as you notify us officially in writing by 27 January 2017. Absences may also be excused in documented cases of critical and unforeseeable emergency.

##### 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 generally abstaining from any activity not productively contributing to our course. Anyone who does not behave respectfully and responsibly may be excused from class for the day.

##### 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, who may level additional sanctions. For more information, see the Academic Integrity Policies and Procedures (<http://academicintegrity.syr.edu>).

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 that afford opportunities to deepen and to assess your learning.

#### 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. Come to class ready to interact with texts and with one another in a learning environment of inquiry and exploration. Then extend our discussion beyond the classroom—onto Twitter, for example, using the course hashtag, #religionunbounded.

#### 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 to study religion by enacting our course texts. You will select a portion (2–3 pages) of a scene from one of these texts and then prepare and perform it for our class. Depending on your scene, you may work alone or with up to 2 partners. A performance requires concentrated study of a text, in contexts, and illustrates performance as a way of studying religion that engages our learning goals.

#### 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 formally make a case for a specific term's centrality in the study of 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.

#### 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 post in your Blackboard journal 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.

#### 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, proposed 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.

#### 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 provide you with a significant 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
Performance	80
Making a case	60
Learning self-assessment	60
Learning log	80
Examination #1	100
Examination #2	120
Learning finale	<u>180</u>
	800 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. We will calculate your course grade based on the 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 17:15 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. An exception may be granted in a documented case of critical and unforeseeable emergency. If an exception is granted, we will accept a makeup learning activity submitted within 5 days of your return to class. No extra credit will be given.

### **What if I will miss a learning activity because of university affairs?**

You may make up a learning activity missed due to university affairs (including varsity athletics) provided that you notify us of your absence officially in writing at least 5 days before your absence and provided that you schedule, before the missed learning activity, to make up the learning activity within 5 days of your return to class.

### **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 27 January 2017 and provided that you schedule, before the missed learning activity, to make up the learning activity within 5 days of your return to class. 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 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.

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

If you think you might need an academic adjustment for a learning disability, 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.

**Any tips for success in this 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?**

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

**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 course materials and with each other.

Week	Date	Topic	Text	Learning activity
1	18 Jan	Opening		
2	23 January		Malory Nye, “Religion” Jonathan Z. Smith, “Map Is Not Territory”	
	25 January	Case study #1: <i>Bacchae</i>	Euripides, <i>Bacchae</i>	
3	30 January		Euripides, <i>Bacchae</i>	
	1 February		Euripides, <i>Bacchae</i>	Learning log entry #1
4	6 February		Euripides, <i>Bacchae</i>	Making a case #1
	8 February		Euripides, <i>Bacchae</i>	
5	13 February		Euripides, <i>Bacchae</i>	
	15 February		Euripides, <i>Bacchae</i>	Learning log entry #2
6	20 February		Euripides, <i>Bacchae</i>	Making a case #2
	22 February		Euripides, <i>Bacchae</i>	Performance #1
7	27 February		Euripides, <i>Bacchae</i>	
	1 March		Exam #1	

Week	Date	Topic	Text	Learning activity
8	6 March	Critical interlude	Karl Marx, "Toward a Critique of Hegel's <i>Philosophy of Right</i> "	
	8 March		Friedrich Nietzsche, <i>The Gay Science</i> , §125	
Spring break				
9	20 March	Critical interlude	Sigmund Freud, <i>Civilization and Its Discontents</i> , §2	
	22 March	Case study #2: <i>Equus</i>	Peter Shaffer, <i>Equus</i>	Learning log entry #3
10	27 March		Peter Shaffer, <i>Equus</i>	
	29 March		Peter Shaffer, <i>Equus</i>	Learning log entry #4
11	3 April		Peter Shaffer, <i>Equus</i>	Making a case #3
	5 April		Peter Shaffer, <i>Equus</i>	
12	10 April		Peter Shaffer, <i>Equus</i>	
	12 April		Peter Shaffer, <i>Equus</i>	Learning log entry #5
13	17 April		Peter Shaffer, <i>Equus</i>	Making a case #4
	19 April		Peter Shaffer, <i>Equus</i>	Performance #2
14	24 April		Peter Shaffer, <i>Equus</i>	
	26 April		Exam #2	
15	1 May	Closing		Learning self-assessment
	8 May			Learning finale, 17:15–19:15