

REL 100: Selected Topics: Understanding Religion
Syracuse University, Fall 2008
8:00-9:20 Tu/Th HL 202

Instructor:

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Office Hours: Tue 10:00-11:00 and by appointment

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Students are encouraged to meet with the instructor throughout the course of the semester if they experience difficulties of any kind. The instructor is available during office hours and by appointment.

Course Description and Objectives

This is a course introducing students to the academic study of religion. It is a survey course, offering a basic familiarization with some the most well-established approaches to the academic study of religion, as well as with some significant areas of contemporary debate. The course will therefore overview the academic study of religion as a complex field given shape through a diversity of academic disciplines and questions. As an introductory course, no prior familiarity with the academic study of religion or with specific religious traditions is presupposed.

After completing the course, student should:

- Be able to articulate a basic understanding of the kinds of questions/concerns addressed by the academic study of religion
- Show a basic familiarity with significant approaches to the academic study of religion
- Differentiate the academic study of religion from devotional participation in religious practices and traditions.

Course Materials

Texts for assigned readings are collected in the Course Reader, available from the Campus Copy Center in Marshall Square Mall, and are also available via electronic reserve on Blackboard.

Schedule of Readings/Assignments

Orientation to the Study of Religion

8/26 (Tue): Syllabus/Introduction
Kant, "What is enlightenment?"
-*"Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity"*

8/28 (Th): Sharpe, "The Study of Religion in Historical Perspective"
-*"The words 'the study of religion' obviously convey different meanings to different people. For most of human history and in most cultures, they would have conveyed no meaning at all."*

9/2 (Tue): Hart, *The University Gets Religion*, "Introduction"
-*"Typically...scholars both inside and outside the field understand the academic study of religion as an outgrowth of the Enlightenment and the triumph of science over dogma."*

Hermeneutics of Acceptance and Suspicion

9/4 (Th): Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (selections)
-*"I shall speak...of a unique 'numinous' category of value and of a definitively 'numinous' state of mind, which is always found wherever the category is applied. This mental state is perfectly sui generis and irreducible to any other...."*

9/9 (Tue): Marx, "Toward a Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*: Introduction"
-*"Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the sentiment of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people."*

9/11 (Th): Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane* (selections); *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (selections)
-*"Man becomes aware of the sacred because it manifests itself, shows itself, as something wholly different from the profane."*

9/16 (Tue): Nietzsche, *The Gay Science; Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (selections)
-*"God is dead; but given the way people are, there may still for millennia be caves in which they show his shadow.—And we—we must still defeat his shadow as well!"*

9/18 (Th): Marion, "Saturated Phenomenon"
-*"A phenomenon that is religious in the strict sense...would have to render visible what nevertheless could not be objectivized. The religious phenomenon thus amounts to an impossible phenomenon."*

9/23 (Tue): Exam 1

Anthropology/Sociology of Religion

9/25 (Th): Durkheim, *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (selections)
-**"There is something eternal in religion that is destined to outlive the succession of particular symbols in which religious thought has clothed itself."**

9/30 (Tue): Eid Ul-Fitr (no classes)

10/2 (Th): Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (selections)
-**"The cultural consequences of the Reformation were to a great extent...unforeseen and even unwished-for results of the labors of the reformers."**

10/7 (Tue): Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System"
-**"The notion that religion tunes human actions to an envisaged cosmic order and projects images of cosmic order onto the plane of human experience is hardly novel. But it is hardly investigated either, so that we have very little idea of how, in empirical terms, this particular miracle is accomplished."**

10/9 (Th): Yom Kippur (no classes)

10/14 (Tue): Asad, "The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category"
-**"There cannot be a universal definition of religion, not only because its constituent elements and relationships are historically specific, but because that definition is itself the historical product of discursive processes."**

Continental Philosophy of Religion

10/16 (Th): Derrida, "Letter to a Japanese Friend"
-**"Deconstruction takes place, it is an event that does not await the deliberation, consciousness, or organization of a subject, or even of modernity."**

10/21 (Tue): Caputo, *On Religion* (selections)
-**"I am groping for a genuinely religious idea of 'truth' and a true idea of 'religion,' one that turns on troubling about oneself and about what one loves, on allowing oneself to be unhinged and troubled by the impossible."**

10/23 (Th): Derrida, "The Villanova Roundtable: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida"
-**"If by religion you mean a set of beliefs, dogmas, or institutions...then I would say that religion as such can be deconstructed, and not only can but should be deconstructed, sometimes in the name of faith."**

10/28 (Tue): Exam 2

Engendering Religion

10/30 (Th): Jantzen, *Becoming Divine* (selections)
-**"It is urgently necessary for feminists to work towards a new religious symbolic focused on natality and flourishing rather than on death...."**

11/4 (Tue): El Guindi, *Veil: Modesty, Privacy and Resistance* (selections)
-**"The veil is a complex symbol of many meanings. Emancipation can be expressed by wearing the veil or by removing it. It can be secular or religious. It can represent tradition or resistance."**

11/6 (Th): Mahmood, "Agency, Performativity, and the Feminist Subject."
-**"The liberatory goals of feminism should be rethought in light of the fact that the desire for freedom and liberation is a historically situated desire whose motivational force cannot be assumed a priori...."**

Religion and Violence

11/11 (Tue): Lincoln, "Theses on Religion and Violence"; *Holy Terrors* (selections)
-**"Certain kinds of religious discourse can assist this task [of defining violent acts as morally justified], specifically those which recode otherwise problematic acts as righteous deeds, sacred duties or the like...."**

11/13 (Th): Devji, *Landscapes of the Jihad* (selections)
-**"As a series of global effects the jihad is more a product of the media than it is of any local tradition or situation and school or lineage of Muslim authority."**

Secularization and Religion

11/18 (Tue): Wallis and Bruce, "Secularization: The Orthodox Model"
-**"The secularization thesis asserts that modernization...brings in its wake...the diminution of the social significance of religion."**

11/20 (Th): Stark, "Secularization, R.I.P."
-**"Once and for all, let us declare an end to social scientific faith in the theory of secularization, recognizing that it was the product of wishful thinking."**

11/25 (Tue): Asad, *Formations of the Secular* (selections)
-**"If the adherents of a religion enter the public sphere, can their entry leave the preexisting discursive structure intact?"**

11/27 (Th): Thanksgiving (no classes)

12/2 (Tue): Open

12/4 (Th): Open

Final Examination

**12/10 (Wed)
7:15-9:15 pm**

Course Requirements and Policies

Participation/Attendance: Student attendance and participation will affect overall evaluation.

Required Readings: Students are expected to complete assigned readings for the beginning of the class period listed on the course syllabus. In addition, it is a requirement that students bring **hard copies** of required materials to class for each class period. Failure to do so may result in grade penalties.

Exams: The primary element of student assessment will consist of three examinations (two examinations during the course of the semester and one cumulative final examination).

Quizzes: If the instructor deems it necessary, quizzes may be used to assess students' completion of reading assignments and possession of reading materials in class. Quizzes will be averaged into the grade totals for the course.

Attendance: Course attendance is **mandatory**. Students are permitted three absences throughout the course of the semester. Only in view of serious emergency or serious documented illness will a student be allowed more than three absences. Students should be aware that merely informing the instructor of an upcoming absence *does not suffice to excuse the absence*. Exceeding three absences will result in the loss of one grade level (e.g. from an A to an A-) for the student's final grade; every two absences beyond four will result in the loss of an additional grade level.

In line with this policy, attendance will be taken each class period.

Academic Integrity: The Syracuse 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, see Academic Integrity Office,
<http://academicintegrity.syr.edu>.

Students with Disabilities/Special Needs: Syracuse University's Office of Disability Services (ODS) authorizes special accommodations for students with disabilities. Students who believe they may need academic accommodations due to a disability must register with the Office of Disability Services at 804 University Ave., Room 309, 443-4498 or 443-1371. Any such students should see the instructor during office hours or make an appointment as soon as possible to discuss their needs.

For more information see Office of Disability Services,
<http://disabilityservices.syr.edu>.

Grade Totals: The final grade will be determined on the basis of a percentage of the total points possible in the course, as outlined below:

<i>Exam 1:</i>	<i>100 points</i>
<i>Exam 2:</i>	<i>100 points</i>
<i>Final Exam:</i>	<i>200 points</i>
Total:	400 points