

## Rel 227: God/s: A Cross-Cultural Gallery



S 08 12:45PM - 2:05PM MW

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Professor of Religion

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Ph.D. University of Chicago, Divinity School: History of Religions and South Asian Studies. Interests: Religion and globalization, new religious/spiritual organizations, popular religious imagery; problems of comparison; contemporary Hinduism.

Cordell Waldron, Teaching Associate  
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Interests: Hellenistic/Greco-Roman religion; early Christianity; hermetism/hermeticism; magic; esotericism/mysticism; religious narrative and mythology; journey/pilgrimage narrative; Platonism; utopian idealism.

Basic Readings (available in the bookstore):

David Morgan, *Visual Piety: A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images*. Berkeley: University of California Press. 1998. ISBN 0-520-21932-5 paper

Diana L. Eck. *Darsan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*. 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed. New York: Columbia University Press. ISBN 0-231-11265-3

Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*. Trans. by Rosemary Sheed with an introduction by John C. Holt. **Paperback:** ISBN: 0803267339; Reprint edition (November 1996)

Saint John of Damascus [730 AD]. *Three Treatises on the Divine Images* John Behr ed. Andrew Louth, trans. St. Vladimir's Seminary Press 2003: ISBN: 0881412457

Additional Readings will be posted on BLACKBOARD for this course.

### Orientation:

The authors of the essay on “God” in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*<sup>1</sup> describe an irony for the study of religion, “It is a word that, more than any other, is at the center of many problems with which religious studies must come to terms, although, and perhaps for this reason, is often bypassed by religionists today instead of straightforwardly faced and carefully examined.” They go on to argue that even theologians, who should be expected to deal with “God,” do so within very particular traditions and ignore “the enormous diversity and complexity that this symbol carries in our languages and cultures.” This course is designed to begin a new discussion about deities/God/gods/Gods in a cross-cultural context. The accent will be on those forms of God/s that are perceived and experienced in embodied/visible/concrete form rather than as “transcendent,” “invisible,” which is why the course is subtitled *a gallery*.

<sup>1</sup> Mark C. Taylor, ed., *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998

Designing such a course, however, is not easy precisely because there are only a few books on this almost taboo topic. I have chosen three to establish some methods for study and help outline the problem. One word of caution: none of the readings attempt to discuss the issue of God/s' existence. They, like myself, take God/s as an actuality (sometimes called a *phenomenon*) in religious life. Deities are alive for many religious people, and their images pervade daily life and spill over into advertisements and international movie spectacles. In this pragmatic sense,<sup>2</sup> God/s exist whether we "believe" in them or not.

Dating from the 1950s, the late Mircea Eliade's *Patterns of Comparative Religion* represents the zenith of a hundred years of discussion about Gods, the "Sacred," and the "Holy" in the history of religions and early anthropology. Once the dominant voice in the study of religion, Eliade is now criticized for being covertly theological and not dispassionately descriptive. Morgan's *Visual Piety*, on the other hand, incorporates the latest theory in cultural studies/sociology of religion on the importance of visual imagery. Central to his book are popular images of Jesus that appear on the walls of numerous living rooms in America. He works consciously with religion as a social construction and "seeks to discern the dynamics of world-making in the use of popular religious imagery." Morgan represents an important orientation toward images of deity in their social context without discussion of their nature as deities. Diana Eck also turns toward visual studies in *Darshan* but she begins some serious discussion of the nature of the divine image within Hinduism. We will try to tackle questions such as:

- How do people construct their world in relationship to various images of God/s?
- What is the status of divine images in various cultural contexts?
- How does knowledge of the great diversity of God/s change our outlook on contemporary religious life in a worldwide context?
- Can we define different "types" of deities?
- How are deities variously related to the world?
- How are humans related to divinity in different religious systems (traditions)?
- Do terms like monotheism, polytheism, and monism make any sense?

This will not be an easy task and will require members of the class to work together. I have no "answers" but can only guide us to see what we see.



**The Road Ahead:** This is a course that will require you to use your eyes—to learn to see intelligently as well as think clearly about often-controversial topics and to *envision* religiosity beyond creeds, belief systems, or ideas.

## Requirements

- Reading assignments for the week must be read by Wednesday so that we can have an informed discussion. Expect short unannounced multiple-choice quizzes on the readings throughout the term; these will be basic questions that anyone who read the material should be able to answer. They count toward the final grade. I do this to encourage you to read-as-you-go.

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<sup>2</sup> Those with a background in philosophy will recognize the traditions of pragmatism and phenomenology informing this statement.

- ② Completing 3 paper/projects due during the term. The papers (5-7 pages) will usually ask you to integrate the readings/lectures with concrete material and often expect you to do some searching on the internet, in popular publications, or into your own daily experience. Detailed instructions will follow. I will give the topic and details on the Monday before each due date giving you one week to complete the project. In addition, I will give two additional short papers for extra credit.
- ② Participation in discussions by active listening and engaged speaking. (I recognize that some people do not feel comfortable speaking in class but do your best to add comments when you can.

Evaluation criteria (based on a 100 point system)

3 papers @ 20 points each=	60 points
Quizzes (likely 5 or 6)	= 20 points
Participation	= 20 points
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Optional papers 2@5	=10 points
Absences over the allotted three =3@each day over (see below)	
<i>Please note that you cannot "make-up" a "pop-quiz."</i>	

### Course Policies

#### *Please Read Carefully now*

**Attendance is required at all class sessions.** We will keep records and begin counting on Wednesday, Jan 21. I allow three "free" absences. Please plan your schedule to allow for religious holidays within this allowance. If you will be absent for sports or other school activities up to the three, then I can allow only one additional personal absence. PLEASE NOTE THAT ABSENCES FOR SPORTS ECT CANNOT GO BEYOND THE ALLOTTED THREE "FREE ABSENCES. Such absences **are not** in addition to the allotted three,. Each unexcused absence over the allotted three absences will lower your final grade by 3 points (i.e., these are minus points.) **This requirement is important in this class because quizzes and papers are only part of the material in a course.** Your presence assures me that you have heard the lectures and participated in the discussions, which will be essential for your understanding. An excused absence means that you have spoken and/or emailed to Donovan or me and received approval for absences in advance due to special circumstances. In case of illness, you will need to talk with us afterwards.

**Common Courtesy:** The class begins at 12:45. Please be on time; walking in late shows little respect for your fellow students or for me. If you have a tight connection between classes let us know and we can seat you accordingly. All cell phones are to be turned entirely off including text messaging and all i-Pods shut down—if you are using a computer for taking notes, I expect that you will NOT be using the internet/computer for any other purpose you are all paying too much for your classes to be only half present. *Repeated lack of courtesy will also result in losing points from your final grade.*

**Academic Dishonesty:** There are writing assignments in the class with no formal tests outside of the short reading quizzes. I expect the work presented to be totally your own with *all* sources, which you have used, fully acknowledged. I will provide full instructions as to citation and form. Both Cordell and I are willing to help you if you have any doubts. If we find any evidence of academic dishonesty, I will report the incident to officials for the college and will impose

sanctions, which normally will result in your failing the entire course. There is zero tolerance for academic dishonesty in this course. Please review the university's new policies on academic integrity: (<http://academicintegrity.syr.edu> )

Paper Deadlines: There are no extensions on papers. The papers will be due at class time.

## General Schedule (subject to change with notice)

January 12, 14: Introduction to "GOD/s": Three approaches and many problems  
*Reading for January 14.* Morgan: Preface +Introduction. Eliade: Introduction by John Holt and the author's Forward.

### **Part One: Images of Deities in "Popular" Practice—Thinking visually about God/s in social contexts.**

**Jan 19 (Holiday)**, Jan 21: Introducing the Hindu Gods.  
*Reading:* Eck: Chapter 1 and 2.

Jan 26, 28: Seeing God/s: Aspects of "visual piety" and "*darshan*"  
*Reading.* Morgan: Chapters 1, 2.

Feb 2, 4: The Image of God/s Hindu and Christian in India and America  
*Reading.* Morgan: Chapter 3. 4, 6.

Feb 9, 11: The Context in Space and Time: Home, Church and Temple  
*Reading.* Morgan: Chapter 5. Eck: Chapter 3, Afterward

Feb 16, 18: Making God Present: Artist, Craftsmen and the Gods  
*Reading:* none.

Paper # 1: Due FEB 23 by class time.

### **Part Two: The Rise of Deities in the "History of Religions School": Thinking "historically" and "typologically" about deities**

*Note: Mircea Eliade founded a new method to study religion called "The History of Religions." The book we are using, Pattern of Comparative Religion set the basic concepts for this method. Eliade will not be used as a "textbook" but I will provide other articles to supplement, update, and critique his perspective. You may find Eliade difficult at first—I will provide a reading guide.*

Feb 23, 25: Coming to Terms with Myth, Symbol and the Gods in History of Religions.  
*Reading:* Eliade, Chapter I Approximation, XI Sacred Time  
*Reading-Discussion:* Yoruba myths of creation & Hindu myths of creation

Mar 2, 4: So called "Primitive" Deities: Considering Power and Presence.  
*Reading:* Eliade, Chapter VI Sacred Stones, and reading on Yoruba art on Blackboard  
*Discussion:* Considering the "affecting presence" of Yoruba Art and reading material on Blackboard

**Optional paper A: due March 16 by class time**

**Mar 9-11 SPRING BREAK**

Mar 16, 18: The Problem of Monotheism and Polytheism as an “historical” issue  
*Reading* Eliade, Chapter II  
 Reading-Discussion: Myths of Sky and Sun

Mar 23, 25: Gender and the God(desses)  
*Reading:* Eliade: Chapters VII , VIII.  
*Reading-Discussion:* Myths of Isis and Devi

Paper #2: Due March 30 by class time.

**Part Three: Some theological issues for Buddhism and Christianity**

Mar 30, April 1: The Divine Icon and Iconoclasm.  
*Reading:* Saint John of Damascus [730 AD]. *On the Divine Images*

April 6, 8: The Problem of the Buddha Body

*Readings:* From Donald Swearer on Blackboard

**Optional Paper B due April 13 by class time.**

**Part Four: NEW IMAGES, NEW FORMS---The world of Comics, DVDs and Internet**

April 13, 15:	Class reports or common discussion on research topics
April 20, 22:	

April 27 SUMMARY AND LAST DAY OF CLASS

Paper #3: Due by class time on APRIL 27.

There is no final exam in this course.