

Introduction to the Study of Religion

Professor: Risa Cromer

A. Course Description

What is religion? How do people experience it? How can these experiences be captured through study? Working understandings of religion are diverse—even contradictory—and the range of inquiries pursued in religious studies is quite broad. The goal of this survey course is to map a broad terrain of ideas for thinking creatively and critically about religion. Together, we will develop new vocabularies and analytical tools to examine topics across three main Units that: 1) review concepts and critiques of religion, 2) explore theoretical approaches to religion from different disciplines, and 3) analyze key topics pertinent to religious studies scholars.

During the first two Units, which comprise the first half of the course, we will become familiar with core concepts by engaging with the ideas of anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists, philosophers, ethno-musicologists, etc. As we read their works, we will consider what each means by “religion,” the strengths and limitations of their methodologies, and the ways we could put their theoretical reflections to practical use. In the final Unit and second half of the course, we delve into case studies from around the world that complicate how religion is defined, experienced, and studied.

I Happened to Be Standing, by Mary Oliver

I don't know where prayers go,
or what they do.
Do cats pray, while they sleep
half-asleep in the sun?
Does the opossum pray as it
crosses the street?
The sunflowers? The old black oak
growing older every year?
I know I can walk through the world,
along the shore or under the trees,
with my mind filled with things
of little importance, in full
self-attendance. A condition I can't really
call being alive
Is a prayer a gift, or a petition,
or does it matter?
The sunflowers blaze, maybe that's their way.
Maybe the cats are sound asleep. Maybe not.

While I was thinking this I happened to be standing
just outside my door, with my notebook open,
which is the way I begin every morning.
Then a wren in the privet began to sing.
He was positively drenched in enthusiasm,
I don't know why. And yet, why not.
I wouldn't persuade you from whatever you believe
or whatever you don't. That's your business.
But I thought, of the wren's singing, what could this be
if it isn't a prayer?
So I just listened, my pen in the air.

From *A Thousand Mornings* (2012)

Course materials draw from various academic sources as well as popular media and ethnographic films. Examples from each of the five “world religions” are examined (Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism) yet this course cultivates awareness about the historical forces that define certain traditions as “religions” and others not. This class is premised on the belief that writing is a process of learning, and therefore assignments are designed to exercise various modes of reflection and expression. Important to our explorations will be approaching the course and each other with openness such that each of us may come to listen the world, as Mary Oliver suggests, with increased curiosity about religion.

Course Objectives

The goal of this course is to introduce students to the study of religion as well as develop their skills for inquiry, which are demonstrated by:

1. Intelligent use and application of key concepts and theoretical frameworks;
2. Critical, sensitive, and clear voice expressed through written, oral, group, and individual work.

B. Required Reading

The following books are required and will be available for purchase at the campus bookstore. Articles will be available for electronic download through eRes.

Nye, Malory (2008) Religion: The Basics. New York: Routledge.

Pals, Daniel L. (2014) Nine Theories of Religion. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

C. Course Expectations

Class Format

This survey course incorporates a mixture of pedagogical strategies, including lecture, group discussion and activities, student presentations, and film. Fundamental to our progress through the course is engaged reading, writing, and discussion. Students are expected to complete all assigned readings and come to class prepared to participate in in-depth discussion of the course materials. In-class discussions will provide space not only for further clarifying the required course materials' meanings, but also for exploring their implications for students' own cultural contexts. Students and the instructor will collaborate to create an active and participatory learning environment. If you would like to further tailor the assignments to your own educational goals, or if there are specific accommodations you need to participate in the course, please feel free to contact me.

Academic Integrity

Academic dishonesty is prohibited and may result in failing grades, suspension, or expulsion. Academic Dishonesty includes cheating on exams or quizzes, as well as plagiarism. Plagiarism is the act of presenting another person's ideas, research or writings as your own. Students suspected of academic dishonesty will be notified by the instructor about actions to be taken. Please familiarize yourself with the honor code and visit these websites to familiarize yourself with plagiarism so that you can avoid doing it unwittingly:

<http://www11.georgetown.edu/programs/gervase/hc/plagiarism.html> or

<http://www.northwestern.edu/uacc/plagiar.html>.

Standard Paper Format

All writing assignments (except for those completed in class) should be typed using standard format: 1x1.25 in margins, 12pt Times New Roman font, double-spaced, and edited for grammar and spelling mistakes. All writing assignments are due in hand at the beginning of class – late or emailed papers will not be accepted.

D. Course Requirements

Participation – 10%

Each of you is an important part of this class. We all bring into the classroom prior knowledge and areas for growth, and can learn a great deal from each other by showing up as fully prepared as we can. Participation is demonstrated when you come to class on time and prepared, ask pertinent questions, respond thoughtfully to classmates, and contribute to an inclusive learning environment. Class discussions should be collegial, accessible, non-hierarchical, and respectful of diversities of all kinds.

Discussion Leadership – 10%

A discussion sign-up sheet will be circulated for students to select a topic of their choice for leading discussion. Students will be assessed on the discussion preparation guide, facilitating a thoughtful conversation based on familiarity with the materials.

Field Notes – 20%

Students will complete four 2-page assignments that cultivate methodological and analytic skills of researching, experiencing, documenting, and reflecting. These assignments require applying course concepts to an activity beyond the classroom.

Field assignment 1: Religion and Pop Culture: Analyzing *O* Magazine

Field assignment 2: Religion at Home: Family of Origin and Personal History

Field assignment 3: Religious Anti-texts: Oral and Aural Traditions

Field assignment 4: Religion on Screen: Critical Film Review

Reading Responses – 12%

Students will post 1-page reading responses to on our course blog prior to the beginning of class during each week of the term. Responses will: summarize the main argument(s) in the reading, raise pertinent questions, and link readings to other ideas from the course. This assignment is designed to help you synthesize the reading material and serve as resources for the arguments you will develop in the course midterm and final.

Position Papers: Midterm and Final – 38%

Students will complete three 3-page take home essays—one for the Midterm, two for the Final—in response to an open-ended prompt that requires the application of core concepts to course materials examined so far. These essays should develop an interpretation of your own based on themes and issues from the entire course. Like your reading responses, these are not summaries but your own views, analyses, and arguments. Grading rubrics will be distributed in the first week of the course to clarify the grading process and qualities of A-F work.

E. Grading Distribution

Thus, your final grade will be determined by the following:

Participation	10%
Reading Responses	12%
Field Notes	20%
Midterm	13%
Final	25%

F. Reading Tips

Keep the following questions in mind as you read and take notes to help you formulate your thoughts for each reading:

- What is the main message or argument the author is trying to convey? Does her/his evidence support it?
- How do the texts relate to each other and to themes we encountered in class?
- What concepts seem significant, and why?
- What questions are you left with after reading the piece?
- Were there parts of the reading that you found intriguing, troubling, insightful, or informative? Why?
- Do you dis/agree with any points the author made and why?
- Have you had similar experiences to those discussed in the text?

G. Course Schedule

Unit I – Introduction to Religious Studies

Week 1: What is religion? Some basics.

Nye, “Religion: Some basics” and “Contemporary religions, contemporary cultures,” Ch 1, 8
Lofton, “Introduction” in *Oprah: The Gospel of an Icon*

Week 2: Why isn't that religion? Some critiques.

Smith, “Religion, Religions, Religious”
MacQueen, “Whose Sacred History?”
Tompkins, “‘Indians’: Textualism, Morality, and the Problem of History”
Field Note #1 Due

Unit II – Interpreting Religion

Week 3: Classically Critical: Marx

Nye, “Power,” Ch 3
Pals, “Religion as Alienation: Karl Marx,” Ch 4

Week 4: Sociological Approaches: Weber and Durkheim

Olson, “Sociology of Religion,” pgs. 209-211
Pals, “A Source of Social Action: Max Weber,” Ch 5
Pals, “Society as Sacred: Emile Durkheim,” Ch 3

Week 5: Anthropological Approaches and Critiques of Culture: Evans-Pritchard, Geertz, Asad

Olson, “Anthropology of Religion,” pgs. 238-244
Nye, “Culture,” Ch 2
Pals, “Society’s ‘Construct of the Heart’: E.E. Evans-Pritchard,” Ch 8
Pals, “Religion as Cultural System: Clifford Geertz,” Ch 9
Asad, “The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category”

Week 6: Psychological Approaches: Freud and James

Olson, “Psychology of Religion,” pgs. 342-352
Pals, “Religion and Personality: Sigmund Freud,” Ch 2
Pals, “The Verdict of Religion Experience: William James,” Ch 6
Jonte-Pace, “Analysts, Critics, and Inclusivists: Feminist Voices in the Psychology of Religion”
Field Note #2 Due

Week 7: Comparative History of Religion: Eliade and Smith

Olson, “History of Religions,” pgs. 157-160
Pals, “The Reality of the Sacred: Mircea Eliade,” Ch 7
Smith, *Map is Not Territory: Studies in the History of Religions* excerpt

Unit III – Key Topics in Contemporary Contexts

Week 8: Ritual & Belief

Nye, “Belief” and “Ritual,” Ch 5, 6

Bell, “Performance”

Film: *In Her Own Time*

Midterm Due

Week 9: Bodies & Experience

LaFleur, “Body”

Sharf, “Experience”

Film: *Jesus Camp*

Week 10: Gender & Power

Nye, “Gender,” Ch 4

Jansen and Dresen, “Fluid Matters: Gendering Holy Blood and Holy Milk”

Mahmood, “Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival”

Film: *Islam Unknown* (Asma Barlas and Amna Nusayr)

Week 11: Texts & Media

Nye, “Text,” Ch 7

Hirschkind, “Cassette Sermons, Aural Modernities and the Islamic Revival in Cairo”

Burdick, “Something ‘bout the Name of Jesus: Racial Meanings in Evangelical Music Scenes”

Film: *YouTube music and sermon selections*

Field Note # 3 Due

Week 12: Things

Schopen, “Relics”

Bado-Fralick and Norris, *Toying with God*, Ch 1-3, Conclusion

Film clips: *Toy Story 1, 2, 3*

Week 13: Place & Time

Gill, “Territory”

Basso, “Wisdom Sits in Places: Notes on a Western Apache Landscape”

Darlington, “The Ordination of a Tree: the Buddhist Ecology Movement in Thailand”

Film: *In Light of the Reverence*

www.sacredland.org

Week 14: Secularism, Science & Modernity

Asad, “Thinking about Secularism”

Jakobsen and Pellegrini, “Times like these”

Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* excerpt

Field Note #4 Due

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