RELS 180-1: Introduction to Religion
Spring 2015

Class Times: TTh 5:00-6:15
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RELS 180: Course Description in University Catalog
What is religion? How do we recognize it? Are there functions religions serve or
questions they typically ask? Are there characteristic answers? Are there secular
religions? How do various cultures approach the category of "religion"? This course
explores diverse religious beliefs and practices in light of classic and contemporary
analyses from several disciplinary fields. 3 hours lecture. This is an approved General
Education course.

Course Goals
This course is designed to make you religiously literate and religiously curious.

What is religion? is a typical way of asking this course’s leading question, but
some would say that asking the question that way is “distancing and objectifying,”
poking at it with a stick, rendering religion merely an object of scientific inspection and
inquiry. So we will prefer the question, What is being religious? To aid our interpretive
understanding, Religious Studies or Comparative Religions is multi-disciplinary, a
collection of academic disciplines (textual studies and literature, history, philosophy,
thology, psychology, sociology and anthropology, ritual studies, etc.) that bring the full
resources of intellectual inquiry and self-reflection into dialog with religion. And some
people conclude that religion does not lend itself exactly to any definition and
 explanation.

Some textbooks prefer to make this the leading question: What does it mean to be
religious? This approach requires entering into the intentionality of the religions and of
people who are religious. This kind of study becomes an interpretive task less than an
explanatory task, and certainly not a reductive endeavor (religion is nothing more
than…). While the purpose of a course on religion in a public university is not to make
you more religious, or less, it does not run away from the possibility that an engagement
with religion and with the religious may leave you existentially touched. (As might a
course on music or literature or art or great ideas.)

To summarize, a course like this should make you literate about both religion as a
dimension of human existence and about specific world religions that vary across time,
place, society, and culture. While working on these goals, you are expected to become
better at reading, writing, and critical thinking as well.
General Education

This is an approved GE course that fulfills the lower division humanities requirement (you need one to graduate). It is also part of the Food Studies Pathway and the Health and Wellness Pathway. Among the ten goals for student learning in the University’s GE program, this course aims in particular at two of them:

Diversity Pathway: Difference, based on culture, race, gender, class, biology, geography, shapes who we are and how we live together with others. Paying attention to diversity in American life (and beyond) is likely to provide a wider and more sympathetic grasp on living together as a society, polity, and culture and render us less likely to take offense at the differences of others.

Global Engagement Pathway: Explore some ways in which peoples in Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, Africa, and Asia understand, practice, and critique religion and religions. Specifically, you will encounter in this class six great world religious traditions, while also gaining experiencing in facing the kinds of issues religions deal with and practicing the entrances into religion the various academic disciplines enable. This means recognizing that you approach other worldviews from inside your own worldview and perhaps makes you ready to risk letting different worldviews address and question each other—out there and inside your own head. Perhaps you will end up becoming a citizen of the world.

Required Texts

There are two kinds of books required for this class. One is a lavishly illustrated textbook on world religions. The other books are specific stories or accounts of what religion or spirituality look like in the world. One is set in India at the time of the birth of Buddhism, and its hero is a young man on a strenuous spiritual quest. Another is an example of nature spirituality in which a young woman sits in a California redwood tree for two years and refuses to come down, in order to save the tree and take a stand against clear cutting. The day before this class begins is the celebration of Martin Luther King day; we will be reading a book in which he chronicles the famous civil rights movement’s summer of 1963, including his famous letter from a Birmingham jail, which every American should read. Finally, there is a book that takes the Jewish and Christian institution called the Sabbath and makes it a performative ritual of social justice in a jaded consumer society.

John Bowker, World Religions: The Great Faiths Explored and Explained, paper, DK Adult Reprint 2006. This lavishly illustrated textbook introduces you to the world religions.

Herman Hesse, Siddhartha, Mass Market Paperback. This classic story about the spiritual quest is meant to give you an idea of what it can be like to be religious, rather than present religion as a specimen that you objectify, dissect, rationalize. It is followed, in assigned readings, by a study of Buddhism, since Siddhartha is set at the beginning of that religious tradition.

Julia Butterfly Hill, Legacy of Luna: The story of a tree, a woman, and the struggle to save the redwoods, Harper One paperback. One form of contemporary religious consciousness these days is environmental spirituality. Movements to save nature, in this case California’s majestic redwood groves, can appeal to self-consciously religious
people, to “spiritual-but-not-religious” people, and to secular people. This book is the amazing story of a 24 year old woman who climbed a redwood tree destined for clear cutting in Humboldt County and remained at the top for over TWO YEARS.

Martin Luther King, Why We Can't Wait, Signet Classics paperback. This is Martin Luther King’s own account of the early civil rights movement in the summer of 1963 in Birmingham, Alabama. It includes his famous letter from a Birmingham jail, “Why we can’t wait,” addressed to local clergy who told him he was going too fast.

Walter Brueggemann, Sabbath as Resistance: Saying no to the culture of now, Westminster John Knox paperback. This book, based on Sabbath observance in the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament), shows religion as moral idealism or common-good justice and finds in the disciplined ritual-keeping of the Sabbath the means to get there. This is a good opportunity to see how rituals, central to much of religion, make space, make time, and so become a performance of what religion is about. The well-worn but mostly ignored ten commandments become a diagnosis of a society that practices a “greed is good” way of life and how to slow it down for the benefit of the common good.

Course Themes
Throughout the class, alongside the world religions we’ll be looking at and the specific short books we’ll be reading, we will be considering several typical themes in the study of religion, such as: sacred texts, rituals, ethics (including especially social justice and resistance), the religious quest for meaning, pilgrimage, religion as human construction or discovery or revelation, community, religion in public space and in politics.

Course Requirements
(Detailed instructions for all assignments will appear on Blackboard.)

Attendance and Participation
Reading and writing assignments you will mostly do on your own, but participatory learning happens in every class. Don’t even think about missing this class. Or coming late. It’s such a bummer standing out in the hall banging on the door to your classroom while people already in class snicker and slackers in the hall ask you to give it up and join them. I will take attendance daily and host frequent in-class activities to spur you on in your responsibilities and make it likely you will pass. I promise a safe classroom environment in which you can freely express yourself on volatile and existentially gripping issues, as you promise to listen respectfully to others. If I could figure out how, I might install the technology that blocks all use of your digital devices, so that only your mind, spirit, and emotions will be in play. This means 75 straight minutes at play in the fields of the Lord instead of on facebook.

Homework and reading assignments
Brief 1-2 page homework assignments (submitted to Blackboard before the class or in the form of in-class quizzes) will help you keep up with the readings and insure that they actually pass through your mind. This allows you to master the arguments and issues and make them your own.
World Religions Worksheets

These are charts that you fill out as you organize and display the information you pick up from the textbook chapters on world religions and also by googling topics that interest you. This Worksheet appears at the end of this syllabus.

Fieldtrip/Real world project

As individuals or teams you will do one of the following:

Choose a religious ritual/event/service, arrive slightly early, be respectful at all times, take notes discretely, and write a 2-3 page report in which you describe what you saw and make some intelligent wagers regarding how this event works and why people engage in it. It’s not against the rules to ask people questions after the service is over, after identifying yourself as a student in a Religious Studies class. (We will discuss in class some of the options.)

Choose something religious in the news, in politics, in the arts, or a famous figure, read up on it and engage it somehow. What’s going on? How might this demonstrate how religion functions in real life, in society and politics.

Tests

You will take an in-class mid-term and a non-cumulative final, including both objective and essay components. Study guides available on Blackboard will help you prepare.

What else about this course

Class preparation

Do the readings on time. Come to class loaded for bear. Get all assignments done on time, so you don’t penalize yourself. All your writing should count as formal writing.

Office hours

You can always find me during my posted office hours to talk about the course, your progress, and general topics in Religious Studies. You can also expect an answer when you contact me by email, preferably through Blackboard. I would be very glad to get to know you better and to talk about religion and being religious. And about majoring in Religious Studies.

Academic ethics and dishonesty

Evidence of academic dishonesty will result in an F grade for the course and a report to Student Judicial Affairs for further action, even including expulsion from the university. Always cite your sources in written material you hand in.

Blackboard

Assignments, readings, updates, announcements will appear on Blackboard. So will materials that I use in my presentations. And guides for exams. Check Blackboard for this class daily.

Students with certified disabilities
Please notify me of any special needs relating to your disability within the first two meetings of the course. I will make every effort to facilitate your success and accommodate special needs. You may be required to show documentation of your disability. You can find information on services available at Accessibility Resource Center (ARC) at http://www.csuchico.edu/arc/

Like the class?
I and all my colleagues would love to talk to you about our department, Comparative Religion and Humanities. If you have special interests in religion or spirituality, including the roles of religion in culture, politics, and society as well as in one’s personal life, I would love to hear about them and discuss them with you.

Course Calendar Outline
Spring 2015

T Jan 20 Introduction to Religious Studies as an academic discipline and to this particular class.

Religious Studies is multi-disciplinary. Here are some of the ways we look at religion: textual studies, historical studies, ethics, theology, social science analysis (psychology, sociology, anthropology), ritual studies. Do you have at least a minimal understanding of these?

Do you see any difference between objectively studying religion, as if under a microscope, and getting into what it means to be religious?

To gain a true understanding of religion, or the religious, do you think an insider’s or an outsider’s perspective is preferable?

Defining religion is more difficult than you might think. Try this: create a definition of religion and then see if you can make it apply to all kinds of religions. Did your definition say too much or too little?

Under what circumstances or with what criteria do you think it is appropriate to study religion in a public university? Can you see that theology is typically done on behalf of a religion, even if it is self-critical and not doctrinaire or pushy? As such, theology is more likely to be done in a seminary, divinity school, or private university.

List several reasons why a college student should be studying religion.

Can you see the difference between interpreting religion, (a humanities discipline?), explaining religion (a social science attempt?), and reducing religion to something else (as in: religion is nothing more than…). My approach, sometimes called phenomenological method, is to imaginatively enter into the world inside religion, even while remaining (in most cases) an outsider.

Many attempts to define and study religion use the word sacred. Try to say what you think that word means and how it applies to religion. Do you think there are dimensions of human existence, like the sacred or the transcendent, that cannot be empirically “caught” or contained, that escape empirical studies? Once you get a sense of sacred, can you imagine sacred space, or sacred time, or sacred text, or sacred object, or sacred teaching, or sacred behavior.

Typically, people think religion highlights special teachings or special behaviors. Do you think one of these is more important than the other? If you are religious, or know
someone who is, what stands out—the teachings they believe or the behaviors they exhibit?

Most religions practice some rituals, which are symbolic actions that tie into some sacred story and are of unique power. Think of some religious rituals that you know about.

In the culture in which you grew up, who was God? Do you think people are thinking about God in new ways?

Why does religion still survive in modern society?

Do you think of yourself as religious? Spiritual? None of the above?

Is there a contemporary religious figure you admire?

What irritates you the most about some religious people?

Do you think science and religion are in a war? If so, must they be?


Write a 1-2 page paper and hand it in at the beginning of class on why it is unlikely that a modern college student will seek the meaning of life through asceticism. First read the early pages of *Siddhartha*, then google “asceticism” to make sure you have a handle on it, and then write the paper. What alternatives to asceticism as a spiritual path are there? (Pilgrimage, learning, social activism?)

This is a coming-of-age story, a story about how character is formed, about how one goes on a quest to find one’s true self (or sacred meaning, or God). It is set in India, 5th century BC, at the time of the birth of Buddhism, one of the world religions we will look at later in the course.

In these opening pages we see Siddhartha leaving home and setting out to find himself and the meaning of life—among a community of ascetics and then through wise teaching.

*Themes: pilgrimage, asceticism, learning as the way to wisdom*

T Jan 27 Read *Siddhartha*, pp 25-62.

The elation of sexual adventurism and the exhaustion of making a living in business. When neither of these is enough, despair offers itself.

*Theme: the religious quest, the search for the meaning of life* (Is this the same as “finding your bliss”?). Is “quest” a good clue to the essence of the religious life? Is there any way in which your own life could be considered a quest? Is college itself a quest, or does quest come after college—or in old age?

Th Jan 29 Read *Siddhartha*, pp 63-81.

Write a 1-2 page paper on Siddhartha’s “enlightenment” and whether you buy it. Hand it in at beginning of class. Pay special attention to pp 74-78. What do you make of the resolution of this coming of age story? Is it satisfying? What does letting go consist in? What is self-discovery. What is the wisdom Siddhartha arrives at? Is it better than Govinda’s?

T Feb 3 Read textbook, *World Religions, pp 58-81, Buddhism.*

Guest Lecture: Professor Carolyn Brown Heinz
Th Feb 5  Fill out World Religions Worksheet: Buddhism
   The worksheet is at the end of this syllabus. This site will help:
   http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/Buddhism
   Theme: Enlightenment as the goal of religion; Monasticism; Religious
   Incarnations (Bodhisattva)

T Feb 10  Read textbook, World Religions, pp 18-43, Hinduism
   Guest Lecture: Professor Carolyn Brown Heinz

Th Feb 12  Fill out World Religions Worksheet: Hinduism
   The Worksheet is at the end of this syllabus. This site will help:
   http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/Hinduism
   Themes: The Thousand Faces of God; Pilgrimage; Sacred Texts as source
   of religious truth; Religion underwriting the social order (caste); Reincarnation

T Feb 17  Read Martin Luther King, Why We Can’t Wait, pp 1-43
   Theme: Religion and social justice

Th Feb 19  Read MLKing, Why We Can’t Wait, pp 85-112, “Letter from a
   Birmingham Jail”
   Theme: Religion and Non-Violent Resistance
   This is one of the most famous essays in American religion and ethics and in
   the civil rights movement. Write a 1-2 page essay summarizing King’s argument
   and hand it in at beginning of class.

T Feb 24  Read MLKing, Why We Can’t Wait, pp 133-191
   Themes: The Black Church and the Civil Rights Movement; Reparations
   Be prepared to discuss the following in class: Is a true religious path likely to involve
   jail time? Must one dimension of the religious life be resistance? Do American blacks
   deserve reparations and does the American political and economic system owe it to
   them?

Th Feb 26  Read textbook World Religions, pp 148-173, Christianity
   Themes: Incarnation, Sin, Redemption through crucifixion and
   resurrection, Sacraments, Church as Body of Christ, Reformation, Material
   culture and art
   Field Trip to a Sunday service and 1-2 page report: What did you see?
   What do you think it means? (If you typically go to church, then go to some entirely
   different church. If you’re Protestant, consider a Catholic church, or vice versa. If you
   are accustomed to a fairly sedate form of worship, consider a Pentecostal service
   that might involve speaking in tongues or healing.)

T Mar 3  Fill out World Religions Worksheet: Christianity
   The Worksheet is at the end of this syllabus. This site will help:
   http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/Christianity
Th Mar 5  American Christianity: History and Politics

T Mar 10 Review

Th Mar 12 Mid-Term

TTh Mar 17-19 Spring Break

T Mar 24 Read textbook World Religions, 174-195, Islam
   Themes: monotheism; sacred text; founding figure; jihad and sharia; religious state
   How would you analyze and interpret the massacre of the French cartoonists by Muslim jihadis in Paris just before this semester began? Is there a “clash of civilizations between the West and Islam? What’s up with the veiling of women among many Muslims?

Th Mar 26 Fill out World Religions Worksheet: Islam
   The Worksheet is at the end of this syllabus. This site will help: http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/Islam

T Mar 31 Cesar Chavez holiday
   Think about religion (Catholicism) and social justice (farm workers). Imagine farm laborers and clergy marching through the fields and picketing grapes as “performative ritual.”

Th Apr 2 Read text Sabbath as Resistance, pp 1-19
   Themes: sacred texts: 10 commandments
   Google the 10 commandments to make sure you know them. They are a foundational element in Judaism and Christianity, and in the culture of the West.
   Then write a 1-2 page paper in which you respond to these questions: How do you think the Love God commandments fit together with the Love your neighbor commandments? Which commandment do you most admire or think necessary? Which commandment would you find it hardest to keep? Do you think it’s a good idea to post the Commandments in public spaces?

T Apr 7 Read text Sabbath as Resistance, pp 20-45
   Themes: rituals as performance; Sabbath as Jewish art form

Th Apr 9 Read text Sabbath as Resistance, pp 58-89
   Themes: religion as resistance to social-economic order
   Write a 1-2 page paper in which you try to imagine how “keeping Sabbath” or “honoring Sunday” could contribute to the health of the social order and the
benefit of the common good. Consider thinking of the Sabbath as an “art form,” a means of decorating and constructing the calendar with cultural meaning.

T 14 Read textbook World Religions, pp 122-147, Judaism
Themes: prophetic tradition, religious ethics

Th Apr 16 Fill out World Religions Worksheet: Judaism
The Worksheet is at the end of this syllabus. This site will help:
http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/Judaism

T Apr 21 Read text Legacy of Luna, pp 1-78
Themes: nature spirituality; environmentalism
Write a 1-2 page essay on how environmentalism could become a form of spirituality, if not religion. You might include things like the recovery of the earth as mother, the kinship of all living things, the imagination of redwoods screaming, etc.

Th Apr 23 Read text Legacy of Luna, pp 79-161
Themes: spirituality as resistance to economic order; re-imagining earth as lost mother

T Apr 28 Read Legacy of Luna, pp 162-246
Themes: religion as spiritual quest, coming of age
Write a 1-2 page essay on how you think she did it. Here is a young woman your age who just sort of volunteers to climb a tree for a couple days and then heroically stays up there for two years, amidst frostbite, extreme weather, harassment by loggers and cops, crowded conditions, yahoos visiting, etc. You might address the question whether you could imagine yourself doing this, or whether there is some other cause you’d be willing to go all out for.

Th Apr 30 Religion in a secular age, Religion and Pluralism
Google secularism. Are you secular? Why is America less secular than Europe? In a post-modern pluralist society, religion is one of the contenders. How well is it doing?

T May 5 The most important critiques of religion
Google the criticisms and condemnations of religion by Freud, Marx, “celebrity atheists,” and many scientists. Consider the charges that religion is an opiate for the masses, an illusion, a projection of parental figures, self-aggrandisment, bogus legitimacy.

After googling atheism, Freud, Marx, and contemporary “celebrity atheists, write a 1-2 page paper saying which one or two critiques of religion seem most persuasive to you and why. If you are already non-religious, you might analyze how you came to be that way.

Th May 7 What is the likely future of religion
Consider the changes in the modern world that may or have led to the decline of religion. Consider what resources religion has to meet these changes and challenges. What is the likely future of your own quest for meaning? How’s your life going? Are you any closer to your true self? This will be our discussion on the last day of class.

T May 12/Th May 14 FINALS

World Religions Worksheet

Use your textbook, lecture notes, and additional research as needed. I recommend this site: http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/

PART 1: Complete all of this section

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographics: How many people belong to this religious tradition today?</th>
<th>Geography: (1) Label the country of origin of this religion (1 pt.). (2) Fill in the approximate number of adherents to this religion living in the United States.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>________</td>
<td>U.S. Adherents: ________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What percent of the world’s population is that? ________</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timeline: List 2 important dates in the development of this tradition and explain what happened.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
PART 2: Complete these questions

1. Describe this religion’s view of **GOD/THE SACRED**. It is monotheist, polytheist, pantheist, or some combination thereof? What images or metaphors are used to represent the sacred?

2. Describe this religion’s view of the world and the basic human dilemma the religion proposes to address.

3. Choose one important **MYTH or STORY** from this tradition. Summarize it and explain its significance to this tradition. How does it relate to the basic teachings of the religion?

4. Name a significant **SCRIPTURE** in this tradition. How old is it? What are its major themes?

5. Report on an object of **MATERIAL CULTURE** from this religion. What is this thing and what is its religious function?

6. Describe a **RITUAL** from this religious tradition. Who participates in it? What happens in the course of this event? What effect or purpose does it serve?

7. Choose one **ETHICAL PRINCIPLE** that is important to this tradition. What is the basis for teaching?

8. What does **RELIGIOUS LEADERSHIP AND AUTHORITY** look like in this religious tradition? Is there a separate clergy? Who can serve in this role? How do clerical and lay roles differ? What kind of authority do religious leaders have?

9. Choose **ONE QUOTE** that you like from a myth, scripture, or saying of a prominent leader in this religion. Copy it out, and explain what it means and why you like it.