

James Bennett  
Winter 2009

jbbennett@scu.edu  
Kenna Hall 300I, 551-1910  
OH: Wed. 9:30-11:00a.m., and by appt.

RSOC 9  
**WAYS OF UNDERSTANDING RELIGION**  
MWF 8:00-9:05 a.m., Kenna 218

**COURSE DESCRIPTION**

*What is religion and how do we understand it as an object of intellectual inquiry?*

This first-level religious studies course introduces students to ways of thinking about religion as an academic discipline. Course readings and discussions will explore different ways of describing and analyzing religion, and a variety of perspectives that inform different understandings of the phenomenon of religion. Our exploration will include a variety of data ranging across a wide range of religious traditions. After examining categories, terms and ideas useful in the study of religion, we will undertake case studies that will enable us to apply these tools to specific religious systems. During the quarter, students will also undertake their own exploration of religion in contemporary society, reporting their findings to the class in group presentations.

**COURSE OBJECTIVES**

- provide students with basic categories and a vocabulary to describe, analyze, and understand religion and its connection to the world in which we live
- enable students to reflect critically and with self-awareness about the challenges and promises of religion as the subject of scholarly inquiry
- provide a brief introduction to a variety of religious traditions and the diverse ways that they can be studied, with particular concern for helping students choose future Religious Studies courses
- provide students with first-hand knowledge of the harmonies and dissonances between the ways religion is described and analyzed in the academy and the way it is described and experienced by religious participants and non-academic observers.
- laying foundations for a liberal education by reflecting on the relationship between religion and human experience, exploring various manifestations of the human struggle with “existential” questions, including how and why we ask the questions that we do (e.g. who am I? what kind of world do we live in? how do we make sense of our experience and condition? how ought we to act in the world?)

**BOOKS**

The following books are required and are available for purchase at the University Bookstore:

Gary E. Kessler, *Studying Religion: An Introduction Through Cases*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed.

Robert Orsi, *The Madonna of 115<sup>th</sup> Street*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.

Readings not in the above texts will be posted on Angel and/or distributed in class. Additional readings may also be announced in class.

**COURSE REQUIREMENTS**

***Intellectual Engagement.*** Your presence and participation is essential to your success in this course and to the success of the course as a whole. We each bring unique life experiences, understandings, and perspectives to our topics, whether or not we have not studied them before. The more these different perspectives are brought to bear on our discussions, the richer the learning experience for everyone, including the instructor. As a result, the intellectual engagement grade extends beyond mere attendance to emphasize engagement with course materials. This engagement is most clearly manifest through active participation in class discussions. Therefore, attendance is only a necessary pre-condition for participation, not the measure of it. Intellectual engagement will be evaluated by the extent to which you contribute to the intellectual environment of the class, including coming to class prepared and on-time, asking questions, and discussing the assigned readings in a serious and respectful manner. Because attendance is a precondition for intellectual engagement, students who miss more than two classes will be penalized at least one point per absence.

***Reflection & Review Papers.*** For several class sessions there will be a reflection and review assignment posted on Angel. Students are expected to bring the completed the assignment to class; students will turn in reflection and review papers for evaluation and they will form an important part of the intellectual engagement grade. These brief assignments will help engage course readings and prepare for class discussions. Sometimes these will require independent reflection about a question or issue related to or expanding upon the day's topic; other times you will be directly responding to a reading assignment using the questions located at the end of the chapter. While papers typically range from one to two pages, there is no minimum page requirement. The only requirement is that comments sufficiently engage the questions or topics. Reflections should be typewritten, clear in style and content, and free of grammatical errors. These assignments will form a basis for class discussion and students will be called upon in class to share their thoughts. *Since the intent of reflection and review papers is to facilitate discussion for the day they are due, these assignments may not be turned in late.*

### ***Introductory Essay***

***Becoming a Student of Religion.*** Write a short paper (2-4 pages) in which you introduce yourself and describe your expectations about becoming a student of the academic study of religion. Include any information that you think will be helpful for the instructor to know you better, not just what is specifically relevant to this course. Include any previous experience studying religion (formal or informal). Finally, describe what you hope to get out of this course (including any specific topics or issues that do not appear to be covered in the readings or syllabus), what challenges or difficulties you anticipate or concern you, what you will need to do to be successful in achieving your goals for the course, and how you will know if you have been successful in achieving your expectations. Honesty trumps posturing, so be true to yourself in reflecting on the role of this course in your education and in relation to your sense of self and your place in the world. **Due January 7.**

***Critical Engagement Project.*** Students will chose one of two possible projects as a means for reflecting upon the relationship between the academic study of religion and the ways that people experience or describe religion outside of the academic context. The two options are:

1. **Media Analysis:** An ongoing evaluation of religion in the media. This assignment has two parts:

1) Trace the way that religion is described and analyzed in *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The San Francisco Chronicle*, *The San Jose Mercury News* or other major media source throughout quarter. Analyze what religions and religious issues editors deem newsworthy and the ways that reporters' descriptions and analyses are in conflict or harmony with the categories in the course, avoid these categories altogether, and/or suggest differing categories of analysis. What are the resulting impressions of religion that emerge from these depictions?

2) Follow a religion and media blog to inform your own reading and critique of the press. Possible sites include: [getreligion.org](http://getreligion.org); [spiritual-politics.org](http://spiritual-politics.org); [therevealer.org](http://therevealer.org); or [uscmidiareligion.org](http://uscmidiareligion.org).

*This is an ongoing, integrative project that involves reading the paper on a daily basis and tracking stories over the course of the entire quarter.*

- 2. Religious Site Visit:** Visit at least two different religious sites at a time when you can observe religious practices or the articulation of religious beliefs (e.g. during worship or a religious festival). The traditions you visit should be different than traditions in which you grew up, now practice, or of which you have considerable knowledge. To what extent do you see the dimensions of religion we have discussed? How do those dimensions enable (or complicate) your ability to make comparisons between the groups and sites you visited? Additional information on how to plan a site visit will be posted on Angel.

Students will submit their choice on **Wednesday, January 14**. Regardless of which project you choose, there will be two steps to completing the project. The first will be an in-class group presentation with up to five others who chose the same option. The second step will be an individual essay analyzing your findings. This essay should conform to the standards for critical writing (see rubric for writing Religious Studies essays on Angel) and are due no later than 9 a.m. on Tuesday March 17.

**Examinations.** There will be two quizzes during the course of the quarter.

**Campus Religion Event Review.** Each quarter presents a variety of opportunities to learn about religion outside of class. As part of trying to integrate classroom learning with people's real experience, students will be required to attend one event and write a 2-3 page review (a description and analysis) of the event. A list of events, updated regularly, will be posted on Angel. *The review is due within one week of the event you attend.*

## LATE POLICY

Assignments turned in late will be penalized a minimum of one point per day late. *Exception:* No credit will be given for review and response papers turned in late (see assignment description above).

## GRADING

Grading is based on a possible 100 points for the quarter, weighted as follows:

Intellectual Engagement	15 (includes Review and Response papers)
Quizzes (15 each)	30
Introductory Essay	5
Campus Religion Event	5
Group Presentation	10
Essay on Orsi book	15
Critical Engagement Essay	20

Final grades will be based upon the following scale: A (95-100); A- (90-94); B+ (87-89); B (83-86); B- (80-82); C+ (77-79); C (73-76); C- (70-72); D (60-69); F (below 60). Final grades are not negotiable, and cannot be changed, except in the case of clerical error.

Grade values are based on the *Undergraduate Bulletin*, which defines grades as follows: A (excellent), B (good), C (adequate), D (barely passing), F (not passing).

## **ANGEL**

Much course information, updates, supplemental readings, reading response topics, grades, etc., will be posted on Angel, which is Santa Clara University's Course Management system. You will need to create an account on Angel if you do not already have one. Angel can be accessed from the main university webpage, via the "SCU Login" link in the upper right corner. Each student will need to enroll for this course. To enroll in the course, once logged into your account on Angel, click on the "find a course" tab under "my courses" and then search for this course. The enrollment PIN for this course is: sacred.

## **DISABILITY ACCOMMODATION POLICY**

To request academic accommodations for a disability, students must contact Disabilities Resources located on the second floor of Benson. Phone numbers are (408) 554-4111; TTY (408)554-5445. Students must register and provide documentation of a disability to Disabilities Resources prior to receiving academic accommodations.

## **ACADEMIC INTEGRITY**

Students are encouraged to collaborate, share ideas, and ask questions of one another. However, all submitted and graded work must be your own and clearly distinguishable from the work of others. When you present others work as your own, or fail to cite the contributions of others to your own work, you have engaged in plagiarism. It matters not whether the work is from a fellow student, the internet, or a traditional printed source. If you have any questions as to what constitutes plagiarism, do not hesitate to ask the instructor. Santa Clara University and the Religious Studies department take seriously the commitment to academic integrity. Any violations, including plagiarism or cheating, may result in an "F" and referral to the Office of Student Life, as described in the *Community Handbook*. Additional information and resources are available at [www.scu.edu/studentlife/resources/academicintegrity/](http://www.scu.edu/studentlife/resources/academicintegrity/).

## COURSE SCHEDULE

The course schedule is tentative, may be supplemented by additional readings, or may be modified to reflect class interests and needs. Updates to the course schedule will be announced in class and posted on Angel.

### *Thinking about thinking about religion*

- Jan. 5: Course Overview  
**\*\*Register for course on Angel**
- Jan. 7: Kessler, chp. 1  
**\*\*Introductory Essay due at beginning of class**
- Jan. 9: Kessler, chp. 2; "Defining Religion" [Angel]  
**\*\*Reflection & Review #1**

### *Sacred Power*

- Jan. 12: Kessler, chp. 3

### *Sacred Story*

- Jan. 14: Kessler, chp. 4  
**\*\*Critical Engagement Project Choice (in class)**
- Jan. 16: "Creation Myths" [Angel]  
**\*\* Reflection & Review #2**
- Jan. 19: **Martin Luther King, Jr. Day (no class)**

### *Sacred Action*

- Jan. 21: Kessler, chp. 5

### *Sacred Space, Time, and Art*

- Jan. 23: Kessler, chp. 6
- Jan. 26: Kessler, chp. 6  
**\*\* Reflection & Review #3**

### *Religious Experience*

- Jan. 28: **Quiz #1**
- Jan. 30: Kessler, chp. 7

### *The Questions Religion Asks and Answers*

- Feb. 2: Kessler, chp. 8
- Feb. 4: Kessler, chp. 9  
**\*\* Reflection & Review #4**
- Feb. 6: Kessler, chp. 12

*Organizing Religion*

Feb. 9: Kessler, chp. 10

Feb. 11: Kessler, chp. 11

Feb. 13: **Quiz #2**

Feb. 16: **President's Day (no class)**

*Case Study: St. Clare of Assisi*

Feb. 18: "The Clare Project"

**\*\* Reflection & Review #5**

*Case Study: Catholicism in Italian Harlem*

Feb. 20: Orsi, intro, 1-3

Feb. 23: Orsi, chp. 4-5 (group A)

Feb. 25: Orsi, chp. 4-5 (group B)

Feb. 27: Orsi, chp. 6-8 (group A)

Mar. 2: Orsi, chp. 6-8 (group B)

Mar. 4: Group Presentations  
**\*\*Orsi Review due**

Mar. 6: Group Presentations

Mar. 9: Group Presentations

Mar. 11: Group Presentations

*Religion in our "modern" world*

Mar. 13: Kessler, chp. 13

**CRITICAL ENGAGEMENT ESSAY DUE: TUESDAY, MARCH 17, 9:00 A.M. (IN PROF. BENNET'S BOX IN THE RELIGIOUS STUDIES OFFICE, KENNA 323)**