

RSOC 9
Ways of Understanding Religion
Spring 2009
Section 47560
MWF 1:00pm-2:05pm

Professor Jason Smick

Office: Kenna Hall, Room 311

Office Hours: Monday, Wednesday, Friday 10:00am – 11:00am, and by appointment

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Course Description and Objectives

This course will serve as an introduction to (a) the world's religions, (b) modern and postmodern theoretical approaches to religion and religious phenomena drawn from sociology, anthropology, and phenomenology, and (3) the phenomenon of fundamentalisms. We will examine the processes by which religious traditions take shape, how they are preserved and transmitted over time, and the way that new religions can, under the right conditions, deform and reform existing social bodies. The course is divided into three phases. During the first phase we will examine several influential theories of religion that will help us make sense of the diverse forms of religion. Here we will familiarize ourselves with a central category in the academic study of religion – the sacred –, work out in a provisional way the relation between the sacred and religious traditions, and then relate the sacred and religious traditions to four dimensions of human experience to which religions direct their attention: *arche*, *cosmos*, *ethos*, and *telos*. The second phase of the course will involve the study of three distinct groupings of religious traditions: Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam), Indian religions (Hinduism, Buddhism), and Chinese religions (Confucianism, Taoism). We will focus on the role that charismatic figures like Muhammed, the Buddha, or Jesus play in the formation of religious traditions, the social conditions that enable new religions to emerge out of existing ones, the role of myths, symbols, and texts in binding together members of a religious community, religious experience, and the practices and institutions that preserve and sustain religious forms of life. We will also examine secular traditions such as Marxism and secular humanism that have emerged in the modern and postmodern eras, and which offer an alternative to traditional sources of human meaning and social cohesion. Finally, the third phase of the class will be devoted to a consideration of the role that religious traditions have played in the formation of the contemporary world, with particular attention given to the way they contribute to and/or resist processes of globalization, modernization, democratization, and secularization. We will attempt to gauge the extent to which religions, as well as philosophical and scientific traditions, have shaped the contemporary world, and the connections among secularization, democracy, and the phenomenon of fundamentalism.

Required Texts

Books:

Malise Ruthven, *Fundamentalism: The Search for Meaning*

Huston Smith, *The World's Religions: Our Great Wisdom Traditions*

Online texts:

Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (Questia.com)
Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* (Questia.com)
Bronislaw Malinowski, *Magic, Science and Religion: And Other Essays* (Questia.com)
Mao, *The Foolish Old Man Who Removed the Mountains* (free)
Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto* (free)
Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (Questia.com)
Bertrand Russell, *A Free Man's Worship* (free)
The U.N. Universal Declaration of Human Rights (free)

Handouts:

Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Parable of the Madman"

***Note: Your reading schedule will be posted to our Angel course page by the end of the first week of classes. Also, by the end of the first week of classes you must sign up for a trial membership at Questia.com.**

Required Films

Baraka (feature film)
Devil's Playground (documentary)

Course Requirements and Grade Weights

Ten in-class quizzes; a Midterm and Final Exam; two short papers (2-3 pages each); active participation in weekly class discussion days and careful observation of classroom etiquette

Course Engagement: 10%

- Your course engagement grade will be based on the degree to which you abide by five rules: (1) you must display the neutral and empathetic manner of approaching religious phenomena discussed in the first week of class; (2) talking in class is not permitted, unless your comments are directed to the whole class (*the exception is when you are in your discussion group); (3) you will treat the other members of the class – your fellow classmates and your instructor – with the kind of respect and dignity that you expect others to display toward you; (4) you will come prepared for each class, which means that you will have completed that day's reading assignment, and you will be prepared to answer questions posed by your instructor related to that assignment; and (5) during your weekly discussion group, you will actively engage your fellow group members

Quizzes: 20%

- You will have a quiz at the end of the last class of every week. The quiz will consist of 2-4 multiple choice, true/false, and/or short answer questions drawn from your readings and class lectures. Make-up quizzes are *not* allowed unless you provide me with a legitimate reason for why you will not be able to take the quiz in class (e.g., medical or family emergency; athletic event, etc.). This must be done *prior* to class.

Papers: 20%

- Writing is an integral part of academic work. Academic writing teaches you how to communicate ideas and values to others. It fosters a critical spirit and clarity of expression. And through the kind of research you will be required to undertake in this class, it is one way of engaging the various traditions that constitute your life and the lives of the communities to which you belong.
- Therefore, you will be required to write two research papers over the course of the quarter. I will provide you with detailed instructions regarding the topic and specific requirements of each term paper at least one week prior to the due date. I expect the highest level of effort when writing research papers. Half-hearted efforts will be rewarded accordingly. Each paper will require you to (a) formulate a thesis and defend that thesis over the course of the paper, (b) thoroughly research your assigned topic, (c) refine your essay until a maximum level of clarity is attained, and (d) display the neutral and empathetic manner of approaching religious phenomena that I will discuss in the first week of class, and which you *must* display in your in-class discussions and in your research papers.
- *Unless you receive a special exemption, your essays are due at the beginning of class on the paper due date. I will automatically deduct 10 points from late papers.*

Mid-term: 25%

- Your midterm will be an objective measure of your ability to take in, connect, and communicate the course material. It will be 'objective' in the sense that your grade will be based primarily on your ability to accurately answer questions where only one answer is appropriate, thereby leaving the corrector little room for 'subjective' evaluation of the response. The midterm will consist of up to 50 questions. The questions will be a combination of true/false, multiple choice, and short answers. There may or may not also be a long essay question.
- *Make-up exams are only permitted if you give me a justifiable reason prior to the day of the exam explaining why you cannot complete it in class on the scheduled day. Failure to do so will result in an automatic failure of the midterm.*

Final Exam: 25%

- Your final will be a take-home exam that you must turn in via email by the end of the scheduled final exam period. Further details regarding the due date and nature of the final exam will be given on the last day of regular classes, which is when I will hand out the final exam prompt
- *Failure to turn in the final exam on time will result in a corresponding failure of the final, unless, of course, you can provide compelling and justifiable reasons for why the exam was turned in late.*

***Note: Attendance is mandatory. You will be required to sign a sheet verifying your presence each class period. Unless an unexpected emergency arises, you must let me know beforehand if you will be missing a class. For each unexcused absence one point will be deducted from your overall Course Engagement score.**

Prerequisites: there are no prerequisites for this course

Office Hours and E-mails

The hours specified above are my regular office hours. Individually or in groups, I encourage you to visit me to discuss ideas, questions, assignments, etc. If you are unable to visit during my regular office hours, please e-mail me to schedule an appointment. I will do my best to respond to your e-mails within 48 hours; I would ask that you do the same.

Disability Accommodation Policy

Those of us with a disability or other impairment for which accommodations will be requested should work through Disability Resources, Drahmman Center, in Benson (408-554-4111; TTY 408-554-5445).

Academic Integrity and Related Expectations

Throughout this course we should conduct ourselves in accordance with the academic integrity standards and policies articulated in the University Bulletin (for details, see: www.scu.edu/studentlife/resources/academicintegrity).

Grading Policies and Regulations:

- A: Excellent
- B: Good
- C: Adequate
- D: Barely Passing
- F: Not Passing
- P: Pass
- NP: No Pass

*Source: Santa Clara University Undergraduate Bulletin 2007-2008, p. 335.

Subject to Change

This syllabus is subject to change at the discretion of the instructor. If you are absent from class, it is your responsibility to check on announcements and changes made while you were absent.