

RSOC 9
Ways of Understanding Religion
Spring 2008
Section 43353
MW 2:30-5:15pm

Professor Jason Smick (408-553-9961; jsmick@scu.edu)
Office Hours: Monday/Wednesday, 11am-12pm, and by appointment

Course Description and Objectives

This course will serve as an introduction to the world's religions, to modern and postmodern theoretical approaches to religion and religious phenomena drawn from sociology, anthropology, and phenomenology, and to 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*

Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*

Bronislaw Malinowski, *Magic, Science and Religion: And Other Essays*

Mao, *The Foolish Old Man Who Removed the Mountains*

Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*

Friedrich Nietzsche, 'The Madman' (from *The Gay Science*)

Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*

Bertrand Russell, *A Free Man's Worship*

The U.N. Universal Declaration of Human Rights

***Note:** Your reading schedule will be posted to our Angel course page by the end of the first week of classes.

Required Films

Baraka (feature film)

The 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 class discussions and in-class assignments

Course Engagement: 10%

Quizzes: 20%

Papers: 20%

Mid-term: 25%

Final Exam: 25%

***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 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 in the event of extenuating circumstances. If you are absent from class, it is your responsibility to check on announcements and changes made while you were absent.