

## RSOC 9: *Ways of Understanding Religion*

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### ***Course Description:***

This is an introductory course to the study of religion and to the field of religious studies. Together we will explore a range of ideas and thinkers that have shaped our understanding of the complex social, political, philosophical, and psychological dynamics that impact upon religious communities and belief systems. This course is designed around a sampling of fundamental thinkers, texts, terms, and questions that have defined modern intellectual discussions over the role of religion within society.

This course provides a safe space through which students can reflect on fundamental existential questions such as, what gives them hope? Is there a larger meaning to human existence? How does religion help or thwart individual self-expression and the quest for authenticity? What are our ethical obligations to ourselves, what are our obligations to others? What is the proper relationship between religion and the public realm? Do the values and activities of a religious community necessary conflict with the presumed neutrality of the public sphere within liberal societies? Is it possible to be both critical of religion and appreciate the role of religion at the same time? Do we have to justify our beliefs? What does it mean to be spiritual but not religious? Is there a common denominator to being religious, or is religious experience individually or cultural specific? Is there an inherent tension between being religious and tolerating *otherness*? What is the relationship between religion and globalization? What is the relationship between religion and violence? Is there a connection between religion and false consciousness? What is the relationship between religion and social hierarchies? Do the secular tendencies of modernity undermine or reinforce religious identity? How does the study of religion better help us to understand the relationship between the individual and society? These are some of the questions we will address.

This class provides a comprehensive survey of the essential critical categories for understanding religious phenomena. Students are also encouraged to critically reflect on how and why the texts and intellectual categories we use for understanding religion have developed and how they may apply to students' own experiences, if any, within the religious world.

### *Learning Objectives:*

1. Students will be able to describe and evaluate the fundamental terms and categories for analyzing religious ideas and practices within the modern world. A list of terms will be provided at the beginning and elaborated upon throughout the course.
2. Students will critically reflect on their own assumptions about religion and will analyze the intellectual orientations of the theorists covered in this course. Students will be able to compare and contrast at least two different cultural and theological positions through the methodologies provided in lectures and in the readings.
3. Students will analyze the tension between personal spiritual experiences and the academic terms used to evaluate such experiences from the presumed distance of an outside “objective” observer. Students will be able to express a critical understanding of both their own orientations and the positions of theorists who have written, and continue to write about religion.

### *Course Requirements:*

*a. Class participation:* [15% of final grade] Class is mandatory and attendance will be noted. Missing more than three classes will automatically result in a reduction of the final grade [i.e. from A to A-]. Students are expected to demonstrate their understanding of the material and mastery of the ideas and terms provided through lecture and the readings by actively engaging in discussions, presenting on the material, asking questions, and participating in small group exercises and assignments. Students are expected to have completed the assigned reading before each class and to bring the assigned material to class ready to discuss. Further details on class participation expectations will be elaborated upon in class.

*Written response and presentation on assigned readings:* [3% of final grade] Students will be broken up into groups [A,B,C,D] and required three times during the quarter to write a 2 page essay, and present on the readings assigned. After presenting, students within the group are expected to help facilitate class discussion. Responses to the questions are an opportunity for students to demonstrate a) their understanding of the texts and ideas, b) their ability to

analyze and critical reflect on the course material, c) relate the questions and ideas from the texts and lectures to their own lives and experiences. Each essay is worth 1% of final grade and will be given either a full “100” points or “0” points. Presentation performance and class discussion falls separately under the “class participation” grade.

***Self-Analysis Essay:*** [2% of final grade] At the end of the second week of class students are required to turn in a 300-350 word essay in which they critically reflect on their own understanding of religion. Students will be given a variety of quotes on the meaning of religion and must choose which quotes they identify with, and which quotes they don't. The essay must additionally address a) how they define religion, b) what they think it means to have a religious experience, c) what they hope to learn most from this course. [Essay grade will be either a full “100” points or “0” points.]

***b. Mid-term:*** [35% of final Grade] For the mid-term students are required to draw on the lectures and material covered in order to answer a selection of questions. Students are allowed to draw on both their notes and texts for the exam.

***c. Final Research Projects:*** [45% of total class Grade: Presentation=10% of total class grade, Written Report=35% of total class grade] For the “Final Research Projects” students are expected to choose between 2 options, and will be broken into work groups. Groups are expected to meet at least twice outside of class before presentations. Each group must collectively report on their projects, however, each student within the group is expected to participate in the final presentation to the class. In addition to the final group presentation, each student will be required to submit a 6-8 page paper on their final project. Further details will be discussed in class.

*Final Research Project options:*

1. **Critical Evaluation of Media:** Through consultation with the instructor students will choose a controversial religious topic [such as abortion, stem cell research, death penalty, terrorism, martyrdom, women's rights, sexuality, creationism and the teaching of religion/prayer in public schools, state funded faith based initiatives, asylum, etc.] and find at least two articles from respected mainstream media sources that present opposite sides of the issue. Drawing on the readings, students will analyze the assumptions made by the authors selected. For example, does the author assume that religion is mostly a reflection of personal psychology,

society, culture, economics, geography, power, society, etc? Does the author think religion plays a positive or a negative role in society? Students will also be given a set of quotes and questions in order to guide their inquiry. Students are allowed to choose the same topic, but must focus on different articles or media formats. Movies and TV shows are an acceptable media format but students are required to provide texts that critically engage the media selected. In their final report students are required to critically reflect on how to relate the topic and articles they have selected to the questions provided, and to the reading material assigned in the course. Students are required to draw on at least six different readings assigned in this course for their final report and presentation.

2. **Critical Evaluation of a “Religious Experience”**: Students are expected to visit at least one religious site in which religious practices central to a particular religious system can be observed. Students are required to choose a religious tradition and site with which they have no, or very little familiarity. Prior to visiting, the professor must approve the location selected. In the final written report students are expected to reflect on their experience of what they witnessed with reference to the texts and ideas covered throughout the course. Students will be given a set of questions and quotes to help guide their experiences and final reports. Students are required to draw on at least six of the readings assigned in this course for their final report and presentation.

Each group will be assigned a time slot towards the end of the term during which they are expected to present their findings to the class. Student’s presentations will be evaluated based on their ability to clearly articulate what defined their research project, what theoretical tools from the readings were used for evaluating their subject matter, their ability to refer directly to the texts assigned, and ability to argue for their thesis. For the presentation portion of the final project, each individual student will be assigned a grade based on the degree to which the method and findings of the report realize learning goals and objectives mapped to this assignment.

The written component of the final research project will be judged on the student’s ability to clearly state their thesis at the beginning, provide evidence for their argument, and demonstrate an ability to critically reflect on their own position by engaging thinkers and ideas that challenge their thesis. Each student will be individually evaluated for the written portion of the final research project. The final grade for the research project will be a combination of the final report

in-class presentation, [10% of total class grade], and the final written report. [35% of total class grade] Further details will be given in class.

All paper assignments should be double-spaced, 12 font text, 1 inch margins. Additionally, all written assignments must be typed, stapled, and with proper title page. All paper assignments should be both submitted via email in "word" document format and a printed out paper copy placed in the box at the religious studies office or directly handed to the professor.

**Extra Credit:** Students are allowed to write a 4-5 page essay on the assigned readings (other than sections already assigned) for extra credit. Essays will be either assigned "100" points or "0" points. Each essay is worth 0.5 of final grade. Extra credit essays are an opportunity for students to improve their final grades. [example: two extra credit essays that have both received "100" points can move a final grade from 89 (B+) to 90 (A-)]. Additionally, extra credit essays are a way to make up having received "0" points on an assigned essay. Students must get approval for their topic from the professor, however, before writing an extra credit essay.

**Campus Events/Lectures:** Students will also be given an opportunity to earn extra credit points by attending and reporting on select events/lectures during the quarter. Details announced in class.

Additional requirements and expectations will be elaborated on in class.

**Grading Structure:** A=100-95, A-=94-90, B+=89-87, B=86-83, B-=82-80, C+=79-77, C=76-73, C-=72-70, D=69-60, F=below 60

***Academic Integrity, Technology, Mindfulness, and Classroom Decorum:***

We will collectively create a safe and dynamic space in which each student will be expected to share his/her insights into the texts, ideas, and traditions covered, while retaining a respectful openness to the opinions and identity commitments of the other students in the class. Respect for the classroom should be demonstrated by not engaging electronic devices other than those used for taking notes. It is important to demonstrate your respect for both the instructor and your fellow peers by reframing from using technological devices. It is also important to develop greater concentration and appreciation by engaging in a learning process that is not solely dependent on external technological stimulation. In order to foster this greater state of "mindfulness," students are expected to demonstrate their "presence" during class by reframing from distracting activities such as having un-authorized side conversations, engaging technological devices such as "texting," answering phones, and/or engaging in

other disruptive behavior. Students are allowed to have computers in class for the purposes of taking notes, however, if you are caught using your computer, or any other form of technology, for purposes unrelated to this course you will be assigned a 1000 word essay on a topic selected by the professor. The paper is due seven days after assigned. Additionally, students should refrain from leaving in the middle of class, even for the bathroom, unless absolutely necessary.

All integrity and policy standards already laid out in the University bulletin apply. (For further see [www.scu.edu/studentlife/resources/academicintegrity](http://www.scu.edu/studentlife/resources/academicintegrity))

***Disability Accommodations:***

Students are expected to notify me at the beginning of the course if they need any special accommodations. For further information on policy and procedures please consult [www.scu.edu/advising/learning/disabilities/index.cfm](http://www.scu.edu/advising/learning/disabilities/index.cfm).

***Office Hours and E-mails:***

I encourage all students to visit me during my office hours. E-mails should be thoughtful and concise. I would rather meet during office hours to discuss issues of greater length. Students should feel free to contact me to set up an alternative appointment if they have a serious conflict with my offices hours.

***Texts:***

Huston Smith, *Why Religion Matters: The Fate Of The Human Spirit In An Age of Disbelief* [ISBN: 9780060671020]

Mircea Eliade, *Patterns In Comparative Religion* (Bison Books)  
[ISBN: 0-8032-6733-9]

Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*  
[ISBN: 0-385-07305-4]

Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (Norton) [ISBN: 9780393301588]

Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality* (Hackett) [ISBN: 0-87220-283-6]

William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (Penguin)  
[ISBN: 0-14-039034-0]

Shunryu Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* [ISBN: 0-8348-0079-9]

Course Reader/Angel: [TBA]

[Assigned Readings should be brought to each class]

## **PART A: INTRODUCTION TO THE SOCIOLOGY AND STUDY OF RELIGION**

### **I. MODERNITY: THE DIALECTICS OF DIS-ENCHANTMENT AND RE-ENCHANTMENT**

1. [1/5] *Introduction: Defining Religion and Religious Studies*

2. [1/7] *Assigned Reading: Huston **Smith**, *Why Religion Matters: The Fate Of The Human Spirit In An Age of Disbelief* [selections: Pages 1-41, 213-277]*

3. [1/12] *Assigned Reading: Mircea **Eliade**, *Patterns In Comparative Religion**

[selections: Pages XVII-23 (AUTHOR'S FORWARD, 1."SACRED" AND "PROFANE," 2. DIFFICULTIES OF METHOD, 3. THE VARIETY AMONG HIEROPHANIES, 4. THE MULTIPLICITY OF HIEROPHANIES, 5. THE DIALECTIC OF HIEROPHANIES, 6. THE TABOO AND THE AMBIVALENCE OF THE SACRED, 7. MANA),  
P. 30-33 (10. THE COMPLEXITY OF "PRIMITIVE" RELIGION),  
P. 367-369, (140. HIEROPHANIES AND REPETITION)  
P. 374-379, (143. THE "CENTRE OF THE WORLD")  
P. 388-391, (147. THE HETEROGENEOUSNESS OF TIME)  
P. 407-408, (155. TOTAL REGENERATION)  
P. 451-453 (171.THE FUNCTION OF SYMBOLS)

#### *Recommended Reading:*

P. 38-41 (11. THE SACREDNESS OF THE SKY)  
P. 124-126, (36. HIEROPHANIES OF THE SUN AND "RATIONALIZATION")  
P. 154-156, (47. THE MOON AND TIME)  
P. 188-190, (60. WATER AND THE SEEDS OF THINGS)  
P. 194-199, (64. THE SYMBOLISM OF IMMERSION, 65. BAPTISM)  
P. 216-217, (74. STONES AS MANIFESTING POWER)  
P. 265-273, (95. A PRELIMINARY CLASSIFICATION, 96. THE SACRED TREE)

P. 331-334, (125. AGRICULTURAL RITES, 126. WOMEN, SEXUALITY AND AGRICULTURE)

P. 354-361, (136. SEXUAL LIFE AND THE FERTILITY OF THE FIELDS, 137. THE RITUAL FUNCTION OF THE ORGY, 138. ORGY AND REINTEGRATION)

4. [1/14] *Assigned Reading*: Peter **Berger**, chapter “Religion and World-Construction” [located in Berger’s *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*]

*Recommended Reading*: Peter Berger, chapter “The Process of Secularization,” [located in *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*]

[Group A]

[*Self-Analysis Essay Due*]

## II. RELIGION AND SOCIETY

5. [1/19] *Assigned Reading*: Karl **Marx**, essay “On The Jewish Question,” [located in *The Marx-Engel’s Reader*, Tucker] [found in course Angel]

*Recommended Reading*: “Religion and Alienation” [located in Berger’s *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*]

[Group B]

6. [1/21] *Assigned Reading*: Friedrich **Nietzsche**, *On the Genealogy of Morality* [selections: Preface, First Treatise: “Good and Evil,” “Good and Bad,” Second Treatise: “Guilt,” “Bad Conscience,” and Related Matters]

[Group C]

7. [1/26] *Assigned Reading: Friedrich Nietzsche, On the Genealogy of Morality*  
[selections: Third Treatise: What Do Ascetic Ideals Mean?]

[Group D]

8. [1/28] *Assigned Reading: Sigmund Freud, Civilization and Its Discontents*  
[selections: Chapters I-V]

[Group A]

9. [2/2] *Assigned Reading: Sigmund Freud, Civilization and Its Discontents*  
[selections: Chapters VI-VIII]

Movie: *There Will Be Blood*, (2007) directed, written and co-produced by Paul Anderson

10. [2/4] Sigmund **Freud**, *Civilization and Its Discontents*  
[Review]

[Group B]

*Recommended: Rene Girard, Violence and the Sacred*  
[selections: chapter, *The Sacrificial Crisis*]

11. [2/9] **Mid-Term:**

## PART B: RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE, SPIRITUALITY, AND COMMUNITY

### III. TRANSCENDENCE, MYSTICISM, AND MEDITATION

12. [2/11] *Assigned Reading: William James, The Varieties of Religious Experience*  
[selections: section on "Mysticism," p.379-429]

[Group C]

13. [2/16] *Assigned Reading: Shunryu Suzuki, Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*  
[Selections: Part I, Part II]

[Mid-term student evaluation of the course]

[Group D]

14. [2/18] *Assigned Reading: Shunryu Suzuki, Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*  
[Selections: Part III]

[Movie: *Baraka*, [Power] (1992) directed by Ron Fricke]

### IV. RELIGION, SOCIAL CRITIQUE, AND GLOBAL ETHICS

15. [2/23] *Assigned Reading: Martin Luther King, "On being a Good Neighbor"*  
[located in *Strength to Love*], [found in course Angel]

*Recommended: M.L. King, "Pilgrimage to Nonviolence" (1960) in African American Political Thought, vol. 2, Confrontation vs. Compromise: 1945 to the Present, ed. Marcus Pohlmann (New York: Routledge, 2004), 32-49. [Course Reader]*

[Groups A, B]

16. [2/25] *Assigned Reading*: Abraham J. **Heschel**, "Religion in a Free Society"  
[located in *The Insecurity of Freedom*] [found in course Angel]

[Groups C, D]

*Recommended*: David Loy, "The Religion of the Market," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 65/2 (1997): 275-290. [Reader]

**STUDENT PRESENTATIONS ON FINAL RESEARCH PROJECTS**

17. [3/2] Student Presentations:

18. [3/4] Student Presentations:

19. [3/9] Student Presentations:

20. [3/11] Student Presentations/Final Reflections and Conclusion