

SYLLABUS FOR CORE CURRICULUM COURSE: RTC 1

Submitted October 7, 2008

J. David Pleins, Department of Religious Studies

1. Cover Sheet

- Date application submitted: October 7, 2008
- Course title: SCTR 11: Origins of Western Religion
- Name and Department: J. David Pleins, Religious Studies Department
- Core Area or Requirement: RTC 1

2. Undergraduate Bulletin Description

An introduction to the study of religion through an inquiry into the origins of Western religion. Surveys the principle issues raised during the foundational periods of the Jewish and Christian religions and considers the continued debates sparked by these traditions.

3. Assessment Plan

- Date application submitted: October 7, 2008
- In developing this core course, I extensively revised a previous course to make explicit our new RTC learning objectives. You will find these reflected in the syllabus in the sections titled "Focus of the Course" and "Core Learning Objectives." The overall class sessions were brought in line with these objectives. (see attached syllabus)
- The course begins on day 1 with a set of questions (see attached "Pre-Course Positions" statement) for students to answer that are based on the main topics of the course. This establishes the baseline of their knowledge as they begin the quarter.
- During the quarter, for each class session students prepare a "Discussion Preparation Focus" assignment based a specific critical thinking element. (See attached assignments developed especially for this course.) Over the course of the quarter, students select from six such elements on three different critical thinking assignment sheets, so that by the end of the quarter students will have engaged 18 critical thinking modes as they do the course reading and prepare for class discussions.
- During the quarter, students also write three essays based on class readings and additional research. Modeled after the leading questions for each session, students are to develop debate-driven papers that explore a key issue raised by the course. (See attached "Grading Rubric for Critical Research Papers" developed for this course.)
- On the last day of classes, students will fill out an "End of Course Positions" sheet (see attached) and compare their answers with those they gave to these same questions on day 1 of the course. They will discuss their progress in class and indicate on this final sheet how their ideas and knowledge advanced in light of this class.
- The overall success of the course will be evaluated through end-of-quarter narrative evaluations.

SCTR 011: Origins of Western Religion
Course Description and Requirements
Fall 2009
CORE: Religion, Theology, and Culture 1

Instructor: Dr. J. David Pleins
Office: Kenna 300J, extension 4763
E-mail: jpleins@scu.edu
Office Hours: MWF xxx or by appointment
E-res Password (no capital letters): origins (E-res = <http://eres.scu.edu>)

CLASS MEETING TIMES:
 Section xxxxx, (4.0 Units) MWF xxxx am, Kenna xxx

FOCUS OF THE COURSE:

This RTC course is built around central religious questions asked at different times and in diverse places.

Through film and by reading myths, plays, philosophic works, and other texts, we will critically examine key questions about the religious dimensions of human experience, especially matters of war, violence, suffering, human purpose, and the relation of science and religion.

In terms of geographic diversity, we will consider these questions in relation to the ancient Mediterranean, the Middle East, Europe, and the United States.

To ensure students actively enter the debate, the course readings emphasize a direct encounter with the literature produced by the writers of the time, not the digested views of secondary authors. We will also draw on a variety of shorter contemporary writings to bring out aspects of these questions for the 21st century.

TEXTS FOR DEBATE AND ANALYSIS:

Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods*, Penguin, 0140442650
 Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, Pocket Books, 0671023373
 Homer, *The Essential Iliad*, trans. S. Lombardo, Hackett, 0872205428
 Mitchell, *Gilgamesh: A New English Version*, Simon and Schuster, 074326164X
 Plato, *The Symposium*, Penguin 0140449272
 Darwin, Charles, *The Autobiography of Charles Darwin*, Norton, 0393310698

CORE LEARNING OBJECTIVES

As an RTC level 1 course for the Core, this course has two major learning objectives:

- A. Students will be able to describe and compare the central religious ideas and practices from several traditions or within one, and from at least two globally distinct regions.*

B. Students will be able to use critical approaches to reflect on their own beliefs and the religious dimensions of human experience.

In terms of central religious practices and traditions as well as diverse regional focus, the course considers the relation between the modern United States, early modern and modern Europe, the Middle East, and the ancient Mediterranean.

In terms of critical dimensions, the course raises the following major reflective questions concerning the religious dimensions of human experience:

TOPIC #1: Is religion to blame for the world's violence?

TOPIC #2: Why is there so much suffering in the world?

TOPIC #3: What, if anything, separates us from other primates, making us uniquely Human?

TOPIC #4: Why are science and religion always at war?

Each session also has its own specific question related to these topic areas.

ADDITIONAL LEARNING OUTCOMES:

By the end of this course, you will be able to:

- (1) analyze religion's rise and development in myth and epic form, examining this process over time and in diverse global contexts,
- (2) debate foundational Greek, Roman, and biblical ideas about desire, reason, and skepticism,
- (3) evaluate the philosophic contribution of Christianity in its earliest and most recent periods,
- (4) assess the enduring impact of ancient beliefs in terms of modern and postmodern debates about religion, science, and culture, and
- (5) craft good critical questions about the religious dimensions of human experience.

CRITICAL ESSAYS AND GRADING (Note that you must complete all assignments to receive a grade for the course; note attendance and plagiarism policies below)

I. Topical Essays Based On Course Readings: Three Critical Research Papers

Students will have the opportunity to write a series of 3 critical essays (5-6 pages in length) based on the sequence of topics covered in the course. (See separate Grading Rubric for Critical Research Papers.) All essays are to be typed double space. Attach bibliography at the end. The instructor is willing to read drafts of your essays prior to the due date to make suggestions for improvement. Each essay must take into account the film viewed for that segment of the course.

*These essays total 75% of the total course grade.

II. Class participation:

1. *Full, Active, and Conscious Participation:* Since your presence in class is expected, your active and enthusiastic participation does factor into your final grade. To be fully involved in class *you will ask thoughtful questions, comment on the readings, point out the essential issues under discussion, make connections between different global regions and time periods, debate the issues, and evaluate alternative views and theories regarding the matters at hand.* In group discussions or debates, you will remain on task and work to bring the discussion to a deeper level. You will probe and engage the subject matter. You will use laptops only for class notes and avoid e-mail or surfing the Internet.
2. *Notes:* Remember to *take good notes on the group discussions* and during the course videos since these will be useful in building your essays.
3. *Make Yourself Heard Outside of Class:* E-mail the professor your reactions to the readings. Discuss class issues with the professor during office hours.
4. *Short Assignments and Films:* Complete all in-class and Discussion Preparation Focus assignments. Attend outside of class films.

Participation factors as *25% of grade.

III. Grading Policies

Course grades run from A to F. But what are the qualities that distinguish high grades from low? There are three areas that are considered as papers are evaluated for *quality*.

1. **Comprehension:** Excellent papers will show a high degree of comprehending the course content, avoiding superficial comparisons. Such papers will offer strong critical reflections on the readings.
2. **Critical Reasoning:** Excellent papers will ask thought-provoking questions that can be debated. Such papers will quote (and evaluate and analyze) relevant sources and offer rigorous use of evidence to make the case. These papers will tap different analytic approaches to examine the data. These papers will unfold in a logical fashion a tightly considered argument. They will also show a healthy ability to spar with opponents' views.
3. **Synthesis:** Excellent papers will make strong comparisons between different readings, time periods, and analytic methods. Such papers will "make connections" between thinkers, sources, time periods and regions.

Good papers (B) are less strong, usually in at least one area. Fair papers (C) show some command of these three categories but are more superficial in character. Deficient papers (D) make a weak effort at these categories. Failing papers (F) have not made any solid headway in most if not all aspects.

Catherine Murphy 3/4/10 10:07 AM

Comment: We recommend that the syllabus include a grade breakdown of some kind (e.g., 94%-100% = A, 90%-93% = A-, etc.). The assessment plan generally also includes a statement of how the course as a whole will be assessed (e.g., by mid-term evaluation, end-of-term evaluations, etc.).

POLICIES, PROCEDURES, AND STANDARDS:

ATTENDANCE POLICY:

*All students are expected to attend class *regularly* and *arrive promptly*.

*Chronic lateness or failure to attend class not only is an annoyance but may result in immediate dismissal and/or failure of the course, *regardless* of completion of assigned work. Exceptions require written proof of illness from the health service or from the student's personal physician. If you are unable to attend, leave word at 554-4763.

*The basic rule of thumb is: 3 absences and the highest grade you may receive in the course is a C (you have missed 10% of the quarter at this point); 5 absences and you must withdraw from the class because if you do not, you will fail the course (you will have missed 15% of the course by that point).

*Students are expected to be actively involved in all Learning Community or Honors Program events and attend lectures, films, or plays related to the course.

*Note that the outside films are *mandatory*.

*Note, also, that your presence in class is *mandatory* for the discussion of papers and that your papers may not be handed in by another student. Failure to appear for a paper discussion will result in an automatic reduction of two letter grade levels for the paper.

ACADEMIC HONESTY: Following the *policies* of the university, all written work must be uniquely and individually one's own work. Failure to abide by the spirit and the letter of this policy may result in dismissal from the course and a failing grade, and will lead to *procedural action* under the student conduct and honor codes. This instructor adheres to the rigorous *standards* we expect at SCU, thus while in-class discussion and outside of class discussion is certainly desirable and encouraged, the material that a student hands in must reflect the student's own labor and ought to be clearly and decisively distinguishable from the work of all other students in the class. At no time are students to represent as their own the work of others. Be sure that you indicate the sources of all quotes and paraphrases. The procedure is simple: If it is not your own material, you should not take credit for it. Indicate the source.

DISABILITY ACCOMMODATION POLICY:

To request academic accommodations for a disability, students must contact Disability Resources located in Benson 216, (408) 554-4109. Students must register and provide documentation of a disability to Disability Resources prior to receiving academic accommodations. (Other advising matters can be directed to The Drahnmann Center in Kenna 101, (408) 554-4318.)

COURSE OUTLINE AND READING SCHEDULE:

(Note: The syllabus date gives the work to be read or completed for that specific date)

Sept 22

Course Introduction: Am I living the question that wants to live in me?

Assignment: Fill out Pre-Course Positions sheet.

TOPIC #1: Is religion to blame for the world's violence?

Sept 24 (For each class date, the reading indicated is to be done *before* the session.)

Heroes on the Road of Adventure

Q: Why are we addicted to the hero's journey myth?

Reading: Mitchell, Gilgamesh, pp. 69-117

Sept 26

Monsters, Seduction, and Death

Q: Do we need enemies in order to be civilized?

Reading: Mitchell, Gilgamesh, pp. 118-158

Sept 29

Ultimate Questions and Ultimate Realities

Q: Does life have no meaning until we accept the reality of death?

Reading: Mitchell, Gilgamesh, pp. 159-199

Oct 1

The Myth of War

Q: Why do we keep deceiving ourselves with the "myth of war"?

Reading: Hedges, ch 1, The Myth of War (E-res handout)

*Afternoon/Evening Film (2:30 p.m., 4:30 p.m., or 7 p.m. in Media Services): King of Hearts

Oct 3

The Iliad: Conflict and Honor

Q: Why are males so obsessed with macho "honor"?

Reading: Homer, Iliad, pp. 1-42

Oct 6

The Iliad: Duty and Choices

Q: Is freedom of choice or social duty the greater value?

Reading: Homer, Iliad, pp. 43-79

Oct 8

The Iliad: Death and Destiny

Q: Is civilization worth all the violence that puts it in place?

Reading: Homer, Iliad, pp. 79-101

Oct 10

The Iliad: Resolve and Compassion

Q: Compassionate soldiers: a dangerous cultural image?

Reading: Homer, *Iliad*, pp. 101-157

Oct 13

Terrorists vs. Heroes

Q: Why are most terrorists male?

Reading: Morgan, *The Deadly Hero* (E-res handout)

TOPIC #2: Why is there so much suffering in the world?

Oct 15

Modernity and Cruelty

Q: Are we insignificant creatures in a pointless universe?

Reading: Sagan, *A Universe Not Made for Us* (E-res handout)

Oct 17

Suffering in the World

Q: Why do the innocent suffer?

Reading: Frankl, pp. 21-115

Video: *Night and Fog*

Oct 20

Visions of Ultimate Truth

Q: Does suffering have “meaning”?

Reading: Frankl, pp. 119-157

Oct 22

A Tragic Optimism?

Q: Does happiness win out over suffering in this world?

Reading: Frankl, 161-179

Oct 24

Religion After the Holocaust

Q: Has the Holocaust destroyed belief in God?

Reading: Fackenheim, *God in the Age of Auschwitz* (E-res handout)

Video: “King of the Jews: Anti-Semitism and Transcendence.” (In class video)

Oct 27

Cruel Universe and Cruel People

Paper #1 Due: Select from one of the following paper topics:

1. Mythic Heroes: cultural asset or misguided delusion?
2. Religious Violence: Can we break the addiction?
3. Suffering: Why is the universe and humankind so cruel?

(Note that your presence in class is MANDATORY for the discussion of papers and that your paper may not be handed in by another student.)

TOPIC #3: What, if anything, separates us from other primates, making us uniquely Human?

Oct 29

The Nature of Desire

Q: Are we prisoners of pleasure?

Reading: Plato, *Symposium*, pp. 3-28

Oct 31

Birth of Beauty

Q: Do we ultimately yearn for beauty?

Reading: Plato, *Symposium*, pp. 28-50

Nov 3

Seeking What is True

Q: Is there a transcendent truth by which we should live?

Reading: Plato, *Symposium*, pp. 50-64

Nov 5

Atoms and Pleasure: Epicurus, Velleius

Q: Are we nothing more than the haphazard playthings of nature?

Reading: Cicero, *The Nature of the Gods*, Book 1 (pp. 69-92, middle of page)

Nov 7

Designer Universe: Stoicism, Balbus

Q: Should we accept the sufferings of the world as part of nature's design for us?

Reading: Cicero, *The Nature of the Gods*, Book 2 (pp. 170-190)

Listen: www.npr.org: select either "Intelligent Design" from Talk of the Nation for 2/13/02 or "Teaching Evolution/Teaching Creationism" from Talk of the Nation for 11/8/02 <http://www.npr.org/>.

Nov 10

Escaping the Evil Material World: Gnosticism

Q: Why are so many still attracted to exotic forms of Christianity?

Reading: The Gospel of Thomas (E-res handout)

Listen: www.npr.org: type in "Elaine Pagels" and find her interview on "Fresh Air" for 6/4/03 or on "All Things Considered" <http://www.npr.org/> or 10/11/03.

*Afternoon/Evening Film (2:30 pm, 4:30 pm, and 7:00 pm in Media Services): Jesus of Montreal

Nov 12

Jesus the Wise Magician?—Healing Bodies

Q: Should a religious person focus on the mind, soul, or body?

Reading: The Book of Mark, pp. 65-85 (E-res handout)

Nov 14

Jesus the Martyred Philosopher?—Healing Hearts and Minds

Q: Is Jesus the Christian's Socrates?

Reading: The Book of Mark, pp. 85-106 (E-res handout)

Nov 17

Religion, Desire, and the True Self: Tensions Today

Q: Why has Christian tradition so often treated sexual desire as shameful?

Reading: Koch, Cruising as Methodology (E-res handout)

Video: Trembling Before God (segments)

Nov 19

Truth In the World and Truth Inside Us

Paper #2 Due: Select from one of the following paper topics:

1. Body: source of truth?
2. Are we prisoners of desire?
3. Nature: divine design or mechanical accident?
4. What does it mean to be Human?
5. The universe: evil or good?

(Note that you must incorporate at least one of the NPR radio segments into your paper.

Your presence in class is MANDATORY for the discussion of papers and that your paper may not be handed in by another student.)

TOPIC #4: Why are science and religion always at war?

Nov 21

Education of a Skeptic

Q: Must modern education lead to religious skepticism?

Reading: Darwin, pp.21-70.

[November 24-28: Thanksgiving Break]

December 1

Religion and Evolution

Q: Did God design a suffering world?

Reading: Darwin, pp. 70-114.

*Afternoon/Evening Film (2:30 pm, 4:30 pm, and 7:00 pm in Media Services):

Darwin's Dangerous Idea

December 3

Public Debates about God

Q: Does science destroy religion?

Reading: Darwin, pp. 114-145.

December 5

Summing Up the Quarter

Q: How did your mind change or remain the same this quarter?

Assignment: Fill out End of Course Positions sheet.

FINAL EXAM: *The Final Paper Due:* Monday, December 8 at 6:30 pm.
God and Modern Science: Dangerous Delusion or Source of Truth?

Paper #3 Due: Select from one of the following four paper topics:

1. Does science destroy religion?
2. Is religion a dangerous delusion or a source of truth?
3. Is science the new religion?
4. Do we need religion in an age of science?

(Note that your presence in class is MANDATORY for the discussion of final papers and that your paper may not be handed in by another student.) NOTE THAT EXAM TIMES ARE *FIXED* AND THAT EXCEPTIONS CANNOT BE MADE TO ALLOW STUDENTS TO GO HOME EARLIER. Be careful of airline ticketing!