

RSOC 9
Ways of Understanding Religion
Spring 2015
Department of Religious Studies
Santa Clara University

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Course Description

This course will serve as an introduction to (a) theoretical approaches to religion and religious phenomena; and (b) the world's religions and several examples of secular traditions. 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 introduce and define 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* (the source of the world), *cosmos* (the world, or universe), *ethos* (the human world), and *telos* (the ultimate goal of a given form of religious life). The second phase of the course will involve the study of three distinct groupings of religious traditions: Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), Indian religions (Hinduism and Buddhism), and Chinese religions (Confucianism and 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.

Course Objectives

- 1) To introduce students to the central ideas, practices, and institutions of the Abrahamic, Indian, and Chinese religions.
- 2) To give students the ability to compare and contrast both the different sub-traditions of each religious tradition (e.g., the Sunni, Shia, and Sufi forms of Islam) and the distinct religious traditions that constitute each set of religions

- (e.g., Christianity in its difference from Judaism and Taoism), and to display the relation of the three sets of religions studied both to the geographical regions within which they emerged – the Middle East, India, and China – and to those regions that they have shaped over the course of their respective histories such as Southeast Asia, North America, and Africa.
- 3) To introduce students to several classical and contemporary theories of religion and show them how to use these theories to critically engage, analyze, and reflect on religion and religious phenomena as well as their own ways of thinking about the world.
 - 4) To enable students to connect religious ideas, beliefs, and practices to the life of religious communities, most especially the role religions have played, and continue to play, in the critique and reconstruction of existing cultural worlds.
 - 5) To gauge the extent to which these traditions do, could, and perhaps should inform our world.
 - 6) To help students learn to charitably engage religious traditions and their ideas, practices, and institutions, especially those different from their own, and to express in class discussions and written assignments these engagements in clear, informed, and nuanced ways.

Required Texts

Books:

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

Online texts:

Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (digital handout)

Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* (digital handout)

Bruce Lincoln, "Notes Toward a Theory of Religion and Revolution" (digital handout)

Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto* (free online text)

Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* ((digital handout)

Bertrand Russell, *A Free Man's Worship* (free online text)

Mao Tse-Tung, *The Foolish Old Man Who Removed the Mountains* (free online text)

Gerhardus van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation* (digital handout)

In-class handouts:

C. J. Bleeker and Seyyed Hossein Nasr on religion
Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Parable of the Madman"

***Please note that all digital handouts, your reading schedule (which includes paper due dates, quiz dates, and links to online texts), and a variety of other course materials, can be found in the “Lessons” section of our Camino/Canvas course page.**

Course Requirements and Grade Weights

Ten in-class quizzes; a midterm and final paper; 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 test your knowledge of the religious tradition studied that week. It 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.

Mid-term: 35%

- 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 Paper: 35%

- 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.
- The final exam will require you to connect the theory of religion developed in class to fundamentalist forms of religion. You will be required to apply this theory to fundamentalisms in such a way that you display your ability to use it to clarify their nature and causes. You also will need to be able to discuss and compare the specific causes and nature of one Abrahamic form of fundamentalism and one Indian form of fundamentalism.
- *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 final course score.**

Feedback:

- Feedback will be offered on each assignment. For quizzes and exams feedback will be offered in the form of an explanation of the reason or reasons why a student missed a question. At the end of each paper submitted in fulfillment of the course requirements I will offer a brief discussion of the extent to which a student met the expectations of the project as detailed in the paper prompt.

Evaluation:

- After the midterm exam students will be provided with a detailed breakdown of their scores on the first five quizzes, the first paper project, and the midterm examination.

- At the end of the quarter, and within one week of the last scheduled final exam, students will receive a detailed summary and point total for each of the assessment areas (quizzes, course engagement, papers, and exams).

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	95%-100%
A-	90%-94%
B+	87%-89%
B	83%-86%
B-	80%-82%
C+	77%-79%
C	73%-76%
C-	70%-72%
D+	67%-69%
D	63%-66%
D-	60%-62%
F:	59% or less

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.