

REL 202-01 Introduction to the Study of Religion

Fall 2017

9:35-10:50 Mon/Wed 233 CCC

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Office hours: Mon – Thurs. 2:00-3:00

Course description: This class introduces students to the comparative study of religion, an academic discipline within the modern university. In this discipline, we do NOT seek to evaluate or judge the truth claims of different religions, but rather we seek to UNDERSTAND how religion functions in the lives of individuals and communities and to ANALYSE the complex interrelationships between religion and other aspects of culture.

There are many reasons to study religions in an academic setting such as a public university. Among them:

- In a world characterized by great religious diversity, effective citizenship requires knowledge about other people's religions along with skills for communicating across the boundaries of religious difference.
- Understanding something of the complex interactions between religion and society help us to be better interpreters of the issues and conflicts that shape the modern world.
- Engaging with people from different religions deepens our capacity for empathic imagination, and opens us to consider the deepest concerns and struggles of other human beings across the globe and through time.

These benefits are available to all students, regardless of personal background or worldview. All that is required is the willingness to practice our three step "rules of engagement" for the study of religion: bracketing of bias, empathetic understanding and informed reflection. This course provides an introduction to this method and other essential tools for the study of religion.

Learning outcomes:

- Be able to explain and apply our three step "rules of engagement" (identifying and bracketing biases, empathetic engagement and informed response) when encountering religious beliefs or practices that are very different from one's own.
- Be able to identify key elements and features that constitute the category of religion (e.g., myth, ritual, symbol, etc.) and apply these elements and features in the description and empathetic investigation of diverse religions.
- Demonstrate an ability to read carefully, think critically and communicate clearly (in oral and written forms) about religious phenomenon, theories of religion, and the problem of how to define religion.
- Practice civil discourse, meaning to engage in oral and written communication about religion in ways that are accurate, respectful, permit disagreement, and lead to greater understanding.

Book on text rental:

Morreall and Sonn, *The Religion Toolkit*

Books to Purchase:

Dennis Covington, *Salvation on Sand Mountain*

Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall apart*

William Paden, *Religious Worlds*

REL 202 Reader

CRITERIA FOR EVALUATION

5 short formal essays @ 10% each	= 50%
Midterm	= 15%
Final Exam	= 20%
Oral report, attendance and class participation	= 15%

EXPLANATION OF EVALUATION CRITERIA:

Five short essays @ 10% each

Each essay will focus on application of concepts and methods learned to the understanding and interpretation of the narrative we are reading. Good essays will demonstrate the following:

- Correct understanding of concepts and methods
- appropriate application of examples to illustrate concepts and methods
- evidence of critical thinking and clear argumentation
- clarity and organization of the essay, grammar, spelling, etc.
- typed, double-spaced and approximately 500-750 words.

Essay prompts.

Short essay #1: *Write about Dennis Covington as a student of religion. Does he practice identifying and bracketing his own biases and beliefs? Is he successful in the project of empathetic engagement? Does he have any critical response? What about you as a reader? Describe your own success or lack thereof in practicing the “3 step rules of engagement.”*

Short essay #2: *Paden presents an approach to religion as a “subject matter”. What is important and essential about this approach to religion? How does it differ from “traditional strategies of comparison”? What does Paden mean by the concept of “religious worlds” and how is this concept helpful for understanding and studying an unfamiliar religion such as “Heaven’s Gate”?*

Short essay #3: *Explain and contrast the views of Durkheim and Eliade concerning the origin, function or nature of religion. Then choose one of the documentaries we have watched in this section of the course -- “Inside Mecca” OR “Split Horn” -- and explain how Durkheim and Eliade would each approach/interpret the religious phenomena presented in the documentary. Your essay should demonstrate the difference between their theoretical perspectives, illustrating your points with specific examples from the video.*

Short essay #4: *What functions does religion serve in Umofia and in Okonkwo's life specifically? What impact does the introduction of a new religion (Christianity) have upon the socio-religious world of Umofia? What falls apart, and why does that matter? In answering these questions, make use of at least one of the key ideas about "religious worlds" from Paden.*

Short essay #5: *What does the documentary "Kumare" suggest to you about the nature and function of religion? About the role of religious leaders? About the importance of community?*

Midterm (15%) and Final (20%):

- The midterm and final will test key terms and concepts presented in class and in assigned materials, and ability to apply terms and concepts to specific contexts.

Oral Report (5%), attendance (5%) and class participation (5%):

Oral report:

- Each student must give a *3-5 minute oral presentation* on a specific religious phenomenon, keyed to topics such as myth, ritual, gods, religious leaders, symbols.
- Students must obtain reliable information about their topic, using at least three sources *including one source that is drawn from library based resources*. "Library based" means resources physically found in the library or accessible through the library home page, such as the *Encyclopedia of Religion*.
- Students will present their material in a way that connects with class content, and will make use of appropriate visual aids.
- Students will avoid distracting body language, speak clearly, and make eye contact with audience.
- On the day of the presentation, you must submit a *one page outline of the presentation, clarifying the main idea of your presentation and including the citations* (in appropriate format) of the sources you used. This document should be typed and grammatically clean. Submit a hard copy to Prof. Keefe and post to our D2L discussion forum so others can access your sources if needed.

Attendance: Regular attendance is expected.

- Excellent attendance (A or A-) is 2 or fewer unexcused absences.
Good attendance (B+, B, or B-) is 3-6 unexcused absences.
Poor attendance (C or D) is 6-10 unexcused absences
Failing attendance (F) is more than 10 unexcused absences.
- Absences will be excused only when the excuse is provided (via email or in person) in advance of the class that will be missed. Acceptable reasons for an excused absence are illness, family emergency, or school sponsored trip or athletic competition.
- If you miss class (excused or unexcused) you should complete the assignments and study any class notes posted on D2L.

Class participation:

- You should come to class having completed the assignments for the day and ready to actively and thoughtfully participate in class discussions or small group discussions.
- Participation includes bringing the assigned reading to class for reference.
- Students will encourage each other to practice civil discourse during our class discussions.

LEARNING ACCOMMODATIONS: Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Statement: The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) is a federal law requiring educational institutions to provide reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities. If you have a disability and require classroom and/or exam accommodations, please register with the Disability Services Office and then contact me. For more information, please visit the Disability Services Office, located on the 6th floor of the Learning Resource Center (the Library). For more information, check here:

<http://www.uwsp.edu/stuaffairs/Documents/RightsRespons/ADA/rightsADAPolicyInfo.pdf>

You can also find more information here: <http://www4.uwsp.edu/special/disability/>

ACADEMIC MISCONDUCT: Plagiarism and cheating are violations of the code of honesty that binds us together within this academic community. The minimum penalty for a violation of academic integrity is a failure (zero) for the assignment. In addition, all infractions will be reported to the university. For more information regarding the university policy on academic misconduct (plagiarism) and disciplinary procedures, please see chapter 14 of the University Handbook, located at this web page link:

<http://www.uwsp.edu/admin/stuaffairs/rights/rightsChap14.pdf>