

**Rel 211 Western Religions**  
**Oxford College of Emory University**  
**Fall 2006**  
**MWF 8:30-9:15**

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**Office hours: MW 9:30-10:30, Tu 2:30-3:30, Th 11:30-12:30**

## **Course Description**

This course will provide an introduction to the history, practice, and core of doctrines of the so-called western monotheisms. The concept of a single deity is often considered the centrally defining and uniting element of these traditions. We will begin the semester with a reflection on the question of the origins of monotheism by critically evaluating the theories of early anthropologists of religion such as Edward Burnett Tylor (1832-1917) and George Frazer (1854-1941). This will be followed by our study of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* from ancient Mesopotamia, and a discussion of Zoroastrianism, the still-existing tradition of ancient Persia. Both traditions have exerted remarkable influences on the development of the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic monotheistic religions. These three traditions will concern us in more detail in the subsequent section of the course. Here you will familiarize yourself with the major religious and philosophical traditions of these three faiths by focusing upon their key historical developments and contemporary forms. Of particular interest to us will be the interaction and interconnectedness of these traditions, past and present.

This fall semester's coinciding of the Jewish High Holidays, the Muslim Ramadan, and the Christian Advent provide us with a concrete opportunity to explore the concept of "fasting" found in these traditions from an interreligious perspective. This allows us an entry point into reflections on how to engage religious similarities and differences constructively and empathetically. Similarly, during the two concluding weeks of the semester we will deal with the question of whether it is justified to speak of an inevitable conflict between different religions, cultures, or civilizations in the light of the semester's findings. We will familiarize ourselves with new religions such as Baha'i and discuss desirable and viable ways to accommodate the world's growing religious diversity from a perspective of simultaneous commitment to one's own worldview and openness toward beliefs and ways of life other than one's own.

Finally and in order to allow you to explore one of these religions more deeply, you will choose one of the religions we study and write a research paper on some aspect of that religious tradition. Comparative topics that cut across individual religious tradition in this course are equally encouraged. The various assignments that you will be asked to complete for this class throughout the semester will facilitate your research and aid you in your writing.

## **Course Objectives**

From the foregoing you can see that the ultimate aim of the course is to neither glorify nor critique any one tradition but rather to allow you to understand how people within these traditions view themselves and how these traditions in their interactions with each other have shaped human values and cultural traditions in and beyond the western world. In short, the goals and objectives for you as a student enrolled in this course are:

- to think both empathetically and critically about the western traditions,
- to gain knowledge of the historical forces and cultural traditions that have shaped and in turn have been shaped by the western religions,
- to develop the ability to interpret texts and other cultural phenomena (such as rituals, myths, architecture) that have religious presuppositions or implications, and, of course,
- to further develop your critical skills as a thinker, reader, writer, and speaker within and beyond the academic study of religion.

## Readings

- (1) Required Course Textbook: Hopfe/Woodward. (available at the book store)
- (2) Required Supplemental Text: The *Epic of Gilgamesh* (available at the book store)
- (3) Additional Readings: Primary and other secondary readings will be photocopied and provided in class or will be made available through LearnLink.

## LearnLink

This course will involve using the online communication tools on LearnLink as well as readings and documents located there. You would do well to acquaint yourselves with the features and different usages of LearnLink and use it as a frequent point of entry and exploration around many of the issues we will be discussing as well as in preparation for the assignments.

## Grading

The Final Grade will be calculated as follows:

(1) Class Attendance and Participation	10%	(100 pts)
(2) Ten Reading Responses	10%	(100 pts)
(3) Three Reflection Papers	30%	(300 pts)
(4) Research Paper and Workshop	30%	(300 pts)
(5) Final Exam	20%	(200 pts)

Total: 1,000 pts

Grading Scale: A: 1,000-900; B: 899-800; C: 799-700; D: 699-600; F: 599-0

## Course Requirements

### 1. Attendance and Participation: 100 pts

You must be present for class meetings in order to do well in the course. The assigned readings will be supplemented by in-class lectures, discussions, exercises, and more. You are allowed to be absent from a total of three (3) class sessions. With every additional absence your final grade for this class will go down 5%. This means you will have to plan ahead with your allowance of three absences. Talk to me ahead of time, if you foresee any difficulties for yourself with this policy. In order to make attendance even more attractive for you, however, I will reward 5 points for each of the three absences that you don't use (i.e., if you have "perfect attendance," I will add 15 points to your total number of points for this class). There will be ample opportunity for you to participate in our class. Apart from my lectures you will be involved in activities such as class discussion, group work with subsequent presentations, and in-class writing assignments. I encourage you to ask questions and suggest topics for discussion. Part of your participation grade consists of **brief oral presentations**. Most of our meetings will start with one of you presenting on the preceding class session. You will need to be concise as you only have five minutes of talking time. Your presentation should include a brief summary of the main points previously discussed as well as an outlook on unresolved issues and open questions which need further address.

### 2. Ten Reading Responses: 100 pts

For this course you will write a total of ten (10) reading responses. Each one is worth a maximum of 10 pts. This is an opportunity for you to react and reflect informally to the assigned readings from the textbook or any other assigned reading. There is no specific requirement for the structure of these responses; they may be academic comments, anecdotes, poems, aphoristic reflections, or all of the above, whatever form you choose. This is a "working notebook" of ideas

for you to draw on when you start constructing your research paper. There is no assigned word count. Your responses may be handwritten or typewritten, so long as they are legible. I will grade them based on the level of engagement with the material. Please keep a bound folder of loose leaf paper as your personal journal.

### 3. Three Reflection Papers: 300 pts

These short papers are meant as a free reflection opportunity. Each of the papers is worth a total of one hundred (100) points. You will reflect in a thoughtful, mature, informed, and scholarly manner on a topic of your choice relating to our course. Any topic, tradition, or text relating to our course is permissible. In your writing I will look for increasing use of terminology relevant to the academic study of religion, exploration of religious concepts, questioning that extends beyond class discussion, and courageous attempts on your part to answer questions that arise from your interaction with the material. The criteria for grading the assignments are: a) level of effort (appropriate length and degree you interact with the material), b) appropriate and relevant use of terms, concepts, examples, c) coherent argument and clear presentation of points. In short, the assignment will be graded based upon evidence of understanding and sensitive, informed level of engagement with the topic of your choosing.

Length: The appropriate length for a reflection paper is 1,000 words (+/- 10%). This roughly equals three pages (12 pt TNR, double-spaced, one-inch margins).

Deadline: You must have turned in at least one reflection paper by fall break. Your final opportunity to turn in a reflection paper is Friday, December 8.

### 4. Research Paper and Workshop: 300 pts

For this class you are required to write one research paper on a topic of your choice. You are permitted and encouraged to write on the same topic as in one of your reading responses and/or reflection papers provided the research paper builds and reflects upon the material already presented there. A research paper is a focused analysis of material obtained from any of a number of different sources (course books, other academic books and monographs, the Internet, magazines, newspapers, personal interviews). The paper must not merely summarize the position maintained by another, but present your own argument, opinions and reflections. Your argument must be amply supported by the data reviewed. This paper should be carefully structured and presented. As this is a research paper, it will include a title page, endnotes or footnotes and a bibliography. Please note that plagiarism is easy to spot, and harshly penalized by the University. Don't be afraid to trust your own words and opinions.

Length: Your research paper should be 2,500-3,000 words. This approximately corresponds to 8-10 pages (12 pt TNR, double-spaced, one-inch margins).

Deadline: The due date for the final draft of your research paper is the last day of class (Monday, December 11). Late papers will be penalized.

Research Process, Timeline, and Workshop: The research and writing process consists of different stages and includes a wide variety of activities such as making a decision about your research topic, locating the appropriate references and texts, devising an outline and initial bibliography for your paper, presenting your initial findings to a group of peers and eliciting feedback from them, writing a preliminary draft, and usually ends in editing and revising your paper before you turn in your final draft. You will find that I indicated different dates and deadlines for these activities on the syllabus at which I expect you to discuss your results to date with me. Part of the research process is presenting initial findings in a coherent manner to a group of peers and senior scholars in your field and eliciting critical feedback from them. For this purpose I reserved three meetings for a research workshop which is meant to give you an opportunity to meet with three to four peers and one senior scholar who share substantive and/or methodological interests with you and your research project. All participants in a workshop

cohort (peers and senior scholars) will have read materials from each sent in advance of the workshop. In preparation for the workshop, an additional hand-out will be made available.

NOTE: You will see that the assignments 2) through 4) are structured in such a way that you may conduct in-depth research on a small selection of topics (or even a single topic) and continue to build on your knowledge and reflections with each exercise. In order to maximize the utility of these assignments for your research process, I suggest that you have turned in all or most of your reading responses and reflection papers before the research workshop.

#### 5. Final Exam: 200 pts

The final exam for our class will be given on Tuesday, December 19 (2:00 – 5:00 PM). It is a formal test of what you have learned during the class lectures and discussions, seminars, guest lectures, your research, films and assigned readings. The questions on the exam will be taken from discussions generated during class. I will indicate the types of questions that may be asked on the final exam during the last class. Textbooks and notebooks will not be allowed in the exam room.

#### A Note on Facilitating a Stronger Learning Experience

Those students needing help with writing, English, or research, please go to the Writing Center run by Dr. Adrian Ivey or the ESL program headed by Dr. Stacy Bell. If a disability requires special circumstances for you in the classroom, taking notes, or taking tests or exams, please see Disability Services on campus for proper aid.

#### A Final Note on Academic Fairness

All students deserve an atmosphere of fairness, honesty and maturity. All of us at Oxford College live by the standards set forth in the Honor Code, which includes the “responsibility for maintaining standards of unimpeachable honesty in all academic work.” The Honor Code also indicates that we cannot tolerate actions in others that violate this code, so we (and you) are obligated to report violations. Oxford College takes this honor code very seriously, as do I, and penalties for violations are severe. Please read the Honor Code carefully; I will trust you to conduct yourselves accordingly.

### **Class Schedule**

Week 1 (8/30, 9/1)	Introductions to each other and the class: What is Religion and What are Western Religions? Readings: Hopfe/Woodward (Introduction Overview)
Week 2 (9/6, 9/8)	The Primitive Origins of Religion Required Readings: Hopfe/Woodward (ch.1) and Selections from Frazer’s <i>Golden Bough</i> (1922) and from Tylor’s <i>Primitive Culture</i> (1871). <u>Wednesday 9/6</u> : First opportunity to turn in a reading response
Week 3 (9/11, 9/13, 9/15)	Ancient Mesopotamia: Gilgamesh and the Hero’s Journey Required Readings: Gilgamesh 62-119 Media: <i>The Hero’s Adventure</i>

- Week 4 (9/18, 9/20, 9/22) Ancient Persia: Zoroastrianism's Conflict Dualism  
Required Readings: Hopfe/Woodward (Ch.10)
- Week 5 (9/25, 9/27, 9/29) Biblical Judaism: Monotheism, Covenant, Written and Oral Torah  
Required Readings: Hopfe/Woodward (ch.11)
- Week 6 (10/2, 10/4, 10/6) Judaism: Sacred Rites, Holocaust, Theodicy, and Modern Jewish Thought  
Required Readings: Hopfe/Woodward (ch.11), Selections from Harold Kushner's *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*.  
Media: *Survivors of the Holocaust*  
Friday 10/6: Last opportunity to clear research paper topic with me. Remember that we should meet face-to-face for this in order to discuss appropriate references for your research!  
Also: You must have turned in at least one reflection paper by now!

**Fall Break (10/9-10/10)**

- Week 7 (10/11, 10/13) Views across Traditions: Fasting Jews, Christians, and Muslims  
Required Readings: Selections from Laleh Bakhtiar (ed.), *Ramadan: Motivating Believers to Action—An Interfaith Perspective* (Chicago: The Institute for Traditional Psychoethics and Guidance, 1995)  
Guest Speaker(s): TBA
- Week 8 (10/16, 10/18, 10/20) Christianity: Life of Jesus and Sources about Him, Doctrine of the Trinity, Schism of the Eastern and Western Church (1054)  
Required Readings: Hopfe/Woodward (ch.12)
- Week 9 (10/23, 10/25, 10/27) Christianity: Protestant Reformation (*sola scriptura*), Monasticism, Christianity Today  
Required Readings: Hopfe/Woodward (ch.12), selections from the works of St. Antony, Thomas Merton, and Fr. McNamee.  
Media: *Merton: A Film Biography*  
Friday 10/27: Last opportunity to discuss bibliography and outline for research paper with me.
- Week 10 (10/30, 11/1, 11/3) Islam as a Monotheistic Creed: Muhammad and the Qur'an, Sacred Rites  
Required Readings: Hopfe/Woodward (ch.13), selections from Ibn Ishaq's *Sirat Rasul Allah*, Mahmoud Ayoub, "The Role of the Qur'an in Muslim Piety," and selections on Muslim prayer from al-Ghazzali's "The Beginning of Guidance."  
Media: *The Hajj*

Week 11 (11/6, 11/8, 11/10)	<p>Variations within Islam, Islamic Mysticism: The Sufi Way to Union with God, Islamic Feminism, Islam Today</p> <p>Required Readings: Hopfe/Woodward (ch.13), additional selections from the mystical poetry of Rabi'a and Rumi, and selections from Bouthaina Shaaban's <i>Both Right and Lefthanded: Arab Woman Talk about Their Lives</i></p> <p>Media: <i>Muhammad: Legacy of a Prophet</i></p> <p><u>Friday 11/10</u>: Send out written materials to members of your workshop cohort (cc: <a href="mailto:fpohl@learnlink.emory.edu">fpohl@learnlink.emory.edu</a>). See additional handout "Preparation for the Research Paper Workshop."</p>
Week 12 (11/13, 11/15, 11/17)	<p>Research Paper Workshop: Presentations and Meetings with Senior Scholars</p> <p>See additional hand out "Preparation for the Research Paper Workshop"</p>
<b>11/20-11/24</b>	<p>No class due to the American Academy of Religion Meeting and Thanksgiving Break</p>
Week 13 (11/27, 11/29, 12/1)	<p>Clash of Civilizations?</p> <p>Required Readings: Samuel P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations" <i>Foreign Affairs</i> 72:3 (Summer 1993): 22-49 and selected responses.</p> <p><u>Friday 12/1</u>: Last opportunity to turn in draft of research paper.</p>
Week 14 (12/4, 12/6, 12/8)	<p>The Future of Western Religions: Baha'i and New Religious Movements in the West</p> <p>Required Reading: Hopfe/Woodward (ch.14)</p> <p><u>Friday 12/8</u>: Last opportunity to turn in a reflection paper.</p>
Week 15 (12/11) (M only)	<p>Last Day of Class: Turn in the final draft of your research paper.</p>
Tuesday, December 19	<p>Final Exam: 2:00 – 5:00 PM</p>