

Rel 211Q 03J Western Religious Traditions

Fall 2012

MW 3:30-5:10 p.m.

Seney Hall 209

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General Education Program Requirements: This course fulfills HSC (History, Society, Cultures), CWR (Continuing Writing), and INQ (Ways of Inquiry) requirements.

"Ways of Inquiry" courses are designed to introduce students to the specific ways knowledge is pursued in each discipline through active engagement in the discipline's methods of analysis. INQ courses start with questions, are student-centered and often collaborative, and place increasing responsibility on students for their own learning. Students not only experience each discipline's distinctiveness but also move beyond its boundaries to understand connections with other disciplines and fields. These explorations often consider ethical issues and social responsibility and expand classroom learning with real-world experiences.

Note: Student work submitted as part of this course may be reviewed by Oxford and Emory faculty/staff for the purposes of improving instruction and enhancing Emory education.

Course Description

This course will provide an introduction to the history, practice, and core doctrines of the religions originating in the Middle East, sometimes called the “western religious traditions” and will introduce and actively use major categories of the academic study of religion with which to penetrate and analyze these traditions. The course’s INQ designation calls attention to inquiry and analysis as main features of our class. Inquiry is a systematic process of exploring issues, of seeking for information by asking questions and using the methods of an academic discipline to find answers. Fundamental questions such as “What is a western religious tradition?” will inform our investigations and will challenge us to find answers from firmly within the perspective of the scholar of religion. In this manner, you will experience how to think like the religion scholar. You will read and analyze primary and other sources from within a religious tradition as well as case studies and scholars’ works on religious communities and their practices. Such inquiry-based learning requires you to embark on a journey of questioning within our scholarly study. In other words, you will be asked to examine the religious traditions we study via your own increasingly independent inquiry and analysis. Primarily through your own processes of inquiry, you will become familiar with methods and categories employed in the academic study of religion. In addition, you will be asked to reflect in a disciplined manner in order to cultivate an appreciation for such methods and categories and to critique and offer improvements to them.

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 gain factual knowledge of the historical forces and cultural traditions that have shaped and in turn have been shaped by the western religions,
- to gain a broader understanding and appreciation of human religious activity and to think both empathetically and critically about the western traditions,
- to develop the ability to analyze and critically evaluate ideas, arguments, and points of view that have religious presuppositions or implications, and, of course,
- to further develop skills in expressing yourself orally and in writing within and beyond the academic study of religion.

Readings

- Required Course Textbooks: Willard G. Oxtoby and Amir Hussain (eds.), *World Religions: Western Traditions*, Third Edition, Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2010. Lawrence Cunningham and John Kelsay, *Sacred Quest: An Invitation to the Study of Religion*, Sixth Edition, Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2011. (Both books are available at the bookstore.)
- Required Supplemental Text: *The Epic of Gilgamesh: An English Version with an Introduction* (Penguin Classics), transl. N. K. Sanders, revised edition, 1960 (also available at the bookstore).
- Additional Readings: Primary and other secondary readings will be photocopied and provided in class or will be made available through Blackboard.

Blackboard

This course will involve using the online communication tools on Blackboard as well as readings and documents located there. You would do well to acquaint yourself with Blackboard's features and different usages and use them as frequent points of entry and exploration around many of the issues we will be discussing as well as in preparation for the assignments.

Course Requirements and Grading

The Final Grade will be calculated as follows:

1. Preparation and Participation	10%
2. Comprehension Checks	10%
3. Academic Journal	10%
4. Lecture Presentation	10%
5. Site Visit Paper	10%
6. First Inquiry Essay	15%
7. Second Inquiry Essay	15%
8. Final Inquiry Essay	20%

1. Preparation and Participation (10%)

ATTENDANCE: 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. Make sure you arrive for class on time. Latecomers will be counted absent at the very beginning of class. Should you be late, you are permitted to enter the classroom only if you do so silently and without disturbing class proceedings. 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.

PROFESSIONAL CLASSROOM BEHAVIOR: My expectations of professionalism extend, of course, to classroom etiquette. This includes such behavior as arriving on time, staying in the classroom until an official break or the end of the class period, packing up only when class has finished, and using a computer only for class purposes. You must not use cell phones and other wireless devices during class. If you use your phone, let's say, to tweet or to check the stock market, or if your phone goes off during class, you will be counted as absent for that day.

PREPARATION: Reading assignments for each week are due at the beginning of each week unless noted otherwise. I expect you to keep up with all readings and assignments and to get the notes for missed class sessions from your peers. Appropriate preparation means reading the material several times, making notes, and coming to class with specific questions; part of this preparation should include consultation with recommended readings and standard reference works in order to understand fully the argument in the text.

PARTICIPATION: 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. Additional activities and assignments including peer assessments on written and oral work will also count toward your participation grade. While I will call on you often and ask about the content of assigned readings you are strongly encouraged to ask questions and suggest topics for discussion in class on your own.

STUDENT MINUTES AND PRESENTATION: Taking notes on lectures and class discussion is a critical part of your learning experience. You are all expected to take notes during class as you will have to draw on them for your own work as well as when preparing for the essays. Your notes will also be the basis for **brief 2-minute presentations** that each of you is to give in class as part of your participation grade. Every day our meetings will start with one of you presenting on the previous class session. Be concise as you only have two minutes of talking time, and **resist the temptation to provide a summary** of the previous class. Instead, highlight the main points and provide details only when relevant. Your peers will provide you with feedback on your presentation's content, structure, and delivery. (Additional tips and guidelines for presentations and public speaking can be found on our Blackboard site.)

MIDPOINT REFLECTIONS: In order to give substantial focus to your observations, questions, and ideas in our class, I will be asking each of you to take a turn doing a "midpoint reflection" – one of you each class session. Roughly half-way through our class, we will shift gears and turn the time over to you. You will summarize **one** key

point or idea from the discussion so far, and then direct our attention to **one** question or issue you feel has NOT been covered enough in the discussion to that point. (This might be something you noticed in your own reading that seemed striking, puzzling, moving, or annoying. Or it might be one of the study questions that we have not yet had time to address.) You should plan on using **no more than 1-2 minutes** for both of these steps combined. After you raise your question/issue, the other class members will join in discussion with you on that topic and ones related to it that occur to them. I will be completely **silent for at least 5 minutes** during this time in order to let you facilitate the discussion and encourage you to talk among yourselves. After 5 minutes I may re-join, summarize the discussion, or I may just let the discussion keep rolling along. The object of this activity is to enable us to take a fresh turn in our class discussions, to focus on questions or angles that might not otherwise occur to us as a whole group, and to receive contributions to the discussion from all members of the class.

2. Comprehension Checks (10%)

Online Comprehension Checks on Blackboard (Bb) will give you an opportunity to test your comprehension and retention of important concepts and ideas from our textbook readings. Please note that you will need to login to Bb using the [Respondus Lockdown Browser](#).

3. Academic Journal (10%)

For this class you are asked to keep an academic journal. The academic journal is designed to encourage you to keep up with your reading, keep you engaged with the material, enrich class discussion (as you will already have something to say), help you practice your skills in thinking critically and writing fluidly, and, finally, provide a log of your thoughts at this state in your studies. We will use Blackboard's blog function to collect your entries which also allows us to read and comment on each other's writing. Additional guidelines and descriptions can be found on our Bb site.

4. Lecture Presentation (10%)

During the course of the semester we will be discussing a wide range of concepts, events, or people in the history and contemporary reality of western religious traditions. Frequently we will benefit from additional information and analysis that goes beyond what our readings offer. Therefore, you will be assigned a particular topic for which to develop expertise through additional out-of-class research. You will be responsible for an **eight-to-ten-minute lecture presentation** based on your topic in order to deepen the class' understanding of the subject. All presenters are required to meet with me prior to the presentation date to discuss the results of their initial research and ideas for the presentation. You must bring a list of three reliable academic sources you are planning to use for your presentation to our conversation. All citations should conform to the conventions of *The Chicago Manual of Style*. Furthermore, everybody will write one [peer assessment](#) for another class member's lecture presentation over the course of the semester. (See guidelines on Blackboard for further information.)

5. Site Visit Paper (10%)

For this paper (1,000 words, +/- 10%) you are required to attend a public worship service or a particular religious ceremony in a religious tradition other than your own. (See Blackboard for details.) You may choose any temple, synagogue, church, mosque, etc. that you wish, with *the rule that it must be of a faith you have never practiced*. To visit and observe worship in a religious tradition other than your own can by itself be a fascinating eye-opening experience. It will give you an insight into the actual living reality of the religion. Moreover, it is also a good way to measure the textbook's knowledge and class discussion against your own personal experiences. Part of the visit will be to interview a member of the group about what you observed. After your visit you are to write an analytical essay that provides a meaningful academic perspective on the worship service by integrating your observations and interview data with some of the scholarly theories, principles, and categories studied this semester. Please see the course schedule and Bb for deadlines and other details.

6.-8. Inquiry Essays (IE): IE 1 (15%), IE 2 (15%), Final IE 3 (20%)

The inquiry essays (see course schedule for dates) encourage you to study one topic carefully and in its context, as you refine your ability to write clearly and argue persuasively within the academic study of religion. All inquiry essays will be take-home essays of 1,200-1,500 words. I will post in advance of each assignment a set of essay prompts from which to choose your topic, as well as guidelines on how to write essays. I will be looking for two things in your writing: a) evidence of your knowledge and understanding of class material and b) your ability to use or apply the material in ways that go beyond what you have read or heard in class. This second part can be done in many ways: you can critique the material, apply it to something else, or even just explain it in a different way. Regardless of your particular approach to the topic, you must have a specific point or claim to argue in your essay. I encourage you to write a thesis paragraph ahead of time and to discuss it with me. Many students have found that it improves the quality of their writing. Support for your writing will also come from your peers through a peer review process (see guidelines on Bb).

Office Hours and Opportunities for Conferencing about Your Writing

The number and nature of the writing assignments make this a writing-intensive course. Peer reviews, class discussion, and written feedback that I give you on your assignments are meant to help you reflect on your writing and to enhance your written work through a series of revisions. In addition to these formal procedures, I also encourage you to see me during my office hours in order for us to reflect together on how to improve your writing. If my office hours conflict with your schedule, I will be happy to make an appointment with you at a more convenient time. At a minimum, I expect everyone to stop by my office at least once in the semester—by yourself, in pairs, or in small groups. Bring a piece of writing together with feedback and comments so that we have something to start our discussion.

Facilitating a Stronger Learning Experience

Those students needing help with writing, English, or research, please also note the support provided by the Writing Center 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 contact the Office of Disability Services to initiate the accommodation request process. More detailed information is available on the website at www.ods.emory.edu.

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.