

REL 211Q - Western Religious Traditions - Fall 2016

TTh 3:30-5:10 p.m. (Language Hall 102)

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Hours: MW 1:30-2:15 p.m., or by appointment

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.

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 access to some basic information about a number of different religions, without attempting to discuss all of them comprehensively (that would be an impossible task),
 - to familiarize yourself with patterns, commonalities, and differences in religious worldviews;
 - to learn how to ask useful questions according to the methods of the academic study of religion;
 - to learn how to think about religion rather than what to think about it;
 - to develop the ability to analyze and critically evaluate ideas, arguments, and points of view that have religious presuppositions or implications,
 - to construct your own arguments within the framework of the academic study of religion to convince others that your way of conceptualizing a matter is correct; and
 - to further develop skills in expressing yourself orally and in writing within and beyond the academic study of religion.
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Readings

- Required Course Textbooks: Willard G. Oxtoby, Amir Hussain, and Roy C. Amore (eds.), *World Religions: Western Traditions*, Fourth Edition, Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. Lawrence Cunningham and John Kelsay, *Sacred Quest: An Invitation to the Study of Religion*, Sixth Edition, Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2013. (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: Other required readings will be made available on Canvas throughout the semester. We will also make extensive use of resources available on the Internet. The web is not a library but it can be a rich and useful resource if navigated cautiously, i.e., if you critically evaluate and assess the information you find there.

You will be expected to have the assigned readings with you, whether from the textbook or the Canvas files, in class each day. Please include the printing of online documents as part of your book budget.

Canvas Learning Technology

This course will involve using the online communication tools on Canvas as well as readings and documents located there. You would do well to acquaint yourself with the features Canvas offers 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.	Reading Responses	10%
3.	Lecture Presentation	15%
4.	Site Visit Paper	10%
5.	Inquiry Essay I	15%
6.	Inquiry Essay II	15%
7.	Final Inquiry Essay	25%

1. Preparation and Participation (10%)

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.

Comprehension Checks: We will have short unannounced quizzes once every week or two at the beginning of class. These will consist of 3-5 questions, usually fill-in-the blanks or multiple choice, which cover the major points from the day's readings. I will put the questions on the SmartBoard and ask you to write out the answers on a sheet of paper. After the quiz you will grade your own paper and sign an honor pledge as we discuss the answers. The comprehension checks are designed to help you with your preparation and can only help, not hurt, your course grade. At the end of the semester I will sum the points. Those whose comprehension check scores are in the top half of the class will have their two Inquiry Essay scores reweighted (from 15/15 to 10/20) in the direction that benefits them most.

2. Reading Responses (10%)

For this class you are asked to write short analytical responses to the assigned readings. This task 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 the discussion function on Canvas to collect your entries which also allows us to read and comment on each other's writing. [See Canvas for more details.](#)

3. Lecture Presentation (15%)

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. Furthermore, everybody will write one peer assessment for another class member's lecture presentation over the course of the semester. [See Canvas for more details.](#)

4. 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. 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. [See Canvas for more details.](#)

5.-6. Inquiry Paper I and Inquiry Paper II (15% each, 30% total)

The inquiry essays 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 words (+/- 10%). I will post in advance of each assignment essay prompts as well as guidelines on how to write the 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 Canvas for more details.](#)

7. Final Inquiry Project (25%)

Your final inquiry assignment asks you to write an inquiry/analysis essay of 1,500 words (+/- 10%). The guidelines for the previous inquiry essays also apply to the final essay. Different from the earlier assignments, however, the final inquiry essay gives you the opportunity to reflect in a thoughtful, mature, informed, and scholarly manner on **a topic of your choice** relating to our course. Any topic or text that relates to and draws on the materials from this course is permissible. Make sure that you offer an argument about, or interpretation of, the topic you choose. Make one overall point. Do not try to do too much. The point of this assignment is to encourage depth, since the journals encourage breadth. [See Canvas for more details.](#)

Policies

Attendance

You must be present for class meetings in order to do well in the course. You should aim to arrive to class meetings a couple minutes early having read the assignment and taken notes, including at least two questions or observations to contribute to discussion. 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. [My expectations](#) of professionalism extend 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, and packing up only when class has finished.

Devices in Class

You may utilize laptops and tablets in their capacity as learning aids during class. You may not use them for communicating, browsing, gaming, doing schoolwork for other courses, or otherwise departing from the task at hand during the brief periods of the week we will spend together. Your phone(s) should be powered down, or in airplane mode, and stowed during class. If you find yourself needing to access the day's reading on your phone, or are expecting a time-sensitive call, announce it before class begins.

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.

Academic Integrity

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. See the Honor Code:

<http://oxford.emory.edu/academics/student-services/student-honor-code>

Access, Disability Services, and Resources

It is the policy of Emory University to make reasonable accommodations for qualified students with disabilities. Students with any condition such that the requirements of this class present a problem should make this known to the instructor as soon as possible and contact Access, Disability Services, and Resources for documentation:

<http://equityandinclusion.emory.edu/access>

Affirmative Action & Sexual Harassment

All persons shall have equal access to programs, facilities, admission, and employment without regard to personal characteristics not related to ability, performance, or qualifications as determined by university policies. Discrimination against any person because of age, ancestry, color, disability or handicap, national origin, race, religious creed, gender, sexual orientation, or veteran status is unacceptable.