

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 religions.” Following a discussion of preliminary questions in the academic study of religion, we will familiarize ourselves with ancient Mesopotamian religion as reflected in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and with 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, particularly in the modern period. In the course’s final section 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 acquaint 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 respect toward beliefs and ways of life other than one’s own.

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

- (1) Required Course Textbook: Willard G. Oxtoby (ed.), *World Religions: Western Traditions*, Second Edition, Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2001. (available at the book store)
- (2) Required Supplemental Text: The *Epic of Gilgamesh: An English Version with an Introduction* (Penguin Classics), transl. N. K. Sanders, revised edition, 1960 (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 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. Academic Journal | 10% |
| 3. One (1) Lecture Presentation | 10% |
| 4. 2 Tests (7.5% each) | 15% |
| 5. Midterm Essay | 15% |
| 6. Final Essay | 15% |
| 7. Academic Research Paper Project | 25% |
| a. First Paper (10%) | |
| b. Revised Paper (15%) | |

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. My expectations of professionalism extend, of course, to classroom etiquette, including the use of cell phones 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 as well.

Preparation and 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. 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. 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 three 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.

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.

Content: In your journal entries you will respond to the assigned readings. These responses are meant as free reflection opportunities and provide you with outlets for your thoughts pertaining to the topics raised in the sources. Each journal entry should (1) briefly quote or summarize one passage in one

assigned text for that one day, and (2) record your honest and informed reflections on the reading, connecting it to some other concept or topic relating to the course (for example, an earlier reading or discussion from our class, an item in the news, something you have studied in another course, or a concept or theory from this or another class to which the text can be related). Your entries should engage the ideas expressed in the text in some direct and thoughtful way. Therefore it is essential that you do not merely summarize the position maintained by the author, but offer your own analysis and reflections, making connections between the readings and some other phenomenon. I usually post study questions or topics for each week's reading on Blackboard, but you are free to formulate your own response.

Although most of the journal entries will focus on the readings, there are two exceptions: (1) one journal entry must reflect on a site visit to a religious community in the Atlanta metropolitan area, including Oxford and Covington (see additional guidelines on BB); (2) another entry may be written in response to an approved event outside of class such as a film, lecture, or performance relating to Islamic civilization. For these special event items, you will need to think about how to relate the event to themes discussed in class.

Format and Due Dates: Journal entries should be 250-300 words long and must be written in response to the week's assigned readings. Since the readings are due at the beginning of the week (unless noted otherwise), you must post your journal entries to Blackboard before the week's first class session. The only exceptions are entries on films, site visits, and approved outside events which are to be turned in before the very next class. Late postings will not be accepted. The journal entry for the last day of class is required of everyone. No journal entries can be posted after the final class session.

Grading: These entries will be graded as either satisfactory (S) or unsatisfactory (U). A satisfactory grade means that you posted the entry on time and followed the instructions fully. I do not grade journals for thesis and organization, as I do other written work. Rules of grammar and style, however, still apply. Put forth your best effort as there will be no opportunities to re-write unacceptable journal entries. You are free to explore a variety of writing styles and voices and do not have to arrive at some finished view or conclusion. The entries are thus informal in the sense that they are exploratory. You control how well you do on the journal assignment, since your grade is determined by how many acceptable journal entries you submit (ones graded with an "S," that is). Here is the scale:

A=14 entries (scattered over at least 11 weeks);

B=11 entries (scattered over at least 9 weeks);

C= 8 entries (scattered over at least 7 weeks);

D= 6 entries (scattered over at least 5 weeks);

F= 4 or fewer entries.

(Plus and minus grades may be given depending on the overall quantity and quality of the posts.)

3. 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-minute lecture presentation** based on your topic in order to deepen the class' understanding of the subject (see additional guidelines on Blackboard). Your lecture will be graded based on content, organization, and delivery. As you will be covering important course content, your audience's responsibility is to listen actively and attentively, take notes, keep track of main ideas, and think critically in order to evaluate and pose questions after the lecture. Furthermore, everybody will write one peer assessment for another class member's lecture presentation over the course of the semester (guidelines available on Blackboard). 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. Please also schedule a meeting with me within two days after your presentation for feedback and suggestions.

4. Two Quizzes (15%; 7.5% each)

Twice during the semester, we will have an in-class quiz (30 min.) based on names and terms of importance for understanding the subject of the course. These names and terms will be drawn from a larger list to be distributed in advance (BB). Nine (9) names and terms from the list will be included on the quiz, and you will be asked to identify and explain the significance of six (6) of those names and terms. You can best study for this quiz by looking up these items in our books and by trying to relate them to the chief themes and issues that have dominated the course so far.

Grading: Grading will proceed according to the quality of the answer: not answering the question means F, a very weak and inadequate answer gets a D, a minimal description rates a C, good description or good interpretation raises it to a B, and excellent description plus excellent interpretation deserve an A. Samples of answers that would qualify for those different grades can be found on Blackboard.

5. Midterm Essay (15%) & 6. Final Essay (15%)

Format and Content: The midterm and final essays on an assigned topic (to be announced on Blackboard) encourage you to study one topic carefully and in its context, as you refine your ability to write clearly and argue persuasively. Both the midterm and final essay will be take-home essays of 1,200-1,500 words. Please use 12 point font (TNR), 1" margins, and double-spacing throughout. I will post in advance on Blackboard, both for the midterm and the final, a set of essay questions 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.

Peer Reviews and Due Dates: Support for your writing will also come from your peers through a peer review process (see guidelines on BB). We will use the wiki function on Blackboard for this purpose. A draft of your Midterm Essay (minimum of 1,000 words) must be posted to Blackboard by Monday, October 4 (8:30 a.m.). Give your editing comments on your partner's essay by Wednesday, October 6 (8:30 a.m.). Refer to the guidelines on peer editing on Blackboard. The final draft of the Midterm Essay is to be submitted through Blackboard no later than Friday, October 8 (11:59 p.m.). Your Final Essay must be submitted through Blackboard no later than Monday, December 13 (5:00 p.m.). There will be no official peer review process for the Final Essay, but you are welcome to follow the same or similar procedures as for the Midterm Essay. Late submissions will not be accepted.

7. Academic Research Paper Project (25%): First Paper (10%), Revised Paper (15%)

The research paper is an opportunity to engage more deeply with a particular topic of your choice related to this course. It is of greatest importance that you choose a topic of interest to you. The research paper should ideally use both primary source material and appropriate secondary and theoretical studies to focus more closely on a particular subject. You can find a list of recommended resources on the [research guide](#) available on the library web page. Your paper must not merely summarize the position maintained by another, but present your own argument, scholarly analyses and reflections. Your argument must be amply supported by the data reviewed.

Format, Length: Your research paper must be 3,000-3,600 words. Use 12 point font (TNR), 1" margins, and double-spacing throughout. Consistently follow the **MLA (Modern Language Association)** system for manuscript format and documentation as set forth in the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, 7th ed. (New York: MLA, 2009). There are several good websites that deal with MLA style (see Blackboard/Assignments/Writing Tips).

Revising and Grading: You cannot expect to produce your best writing when you first get started. Thus, revising your work is an integral part of successful writing. Revising is a process of rethinking your paper and differs from simple proofreading. As you revise your paper you will have to reconsider your argument, review your evidence, refine your purpose, and reorganize your presentation. Please see the

appropriate handouts (e.g., Editing and Proofreading, Revising Drafts) on the [UNC Writing Center](#) web page for more information. In order to increase intentionality in the writing process, your research paper will develop in stages over the course of the semester and will go through a series of evaluations and revisions (see below). The grade for the research paper project will be calculated as follows: First Paper 10% and Final Revised Paper 15%. The grade for the Final Revised Paper will depend on the overall quality of the paper as well as on the quality of the revisions and the stage-by-stage assignments in the research and writing process.

Stages of the Writing Process: 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, preliminary research to discover pertinent and critical aspects about the topic, narrowing the research question, 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 finally 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 course schedule at which I expect you to discuss your results to date with me and/or your peers.

- Wednesday 10/13: **Preparation statement** on research paper topic (BB)
- Friday 10/15: **Library research workshop**
- Monday 10/18: **“Discover Your Topic”** (worksheet, BB)
- Wednesday 10/20: **Three annotations** (BB)
- Monday 10/25: **Annotated bibliography** (6 sources, BB)
- Sunday 10/31: **Thesis statement and outline** (BB)
- Wednesday 11/17: **Draft** for peer review (minimum of 3,000 words, completed bibliography without annotations)
- Friday 11/19: In-class **peer reviews** (refer to peer review handout for guidelines)
- Tuesday 11/23: Turn in **first paper** along with peer reviews
- Monday 12/6 (last day of class): Turn in **final revised paper** along with an **abstract and memo** addressing revisions. Late papers will not be accepted.

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 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 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.

CLASS SCHEDULE

I. Academic Study of Religion

Week 1 (8/25, 8/27)

Introductions to each other and the class

Reading: Oxtoby (Introduction: A Personal Invitation, 1-9) and Horace Miner's "Body ritual among the Nacirema" (BB).

II. Ancient Middle East and Persia

Week 2 (8/30, 9/1, 9/3)

The Ancient World: Gilgamesh and Mesopotamian Religion

Reading: Oxtoby (Ch. 1, 10-31), *Epic of Gilgamesh* (entire epic)

Labor Day (9/6)

Week 3 (9/8, 9/10)

Symbol and Myth: Gilgamesh and Enuma Elish

Reading: Enuma Elish (BB); "Myth." [*Contemporary American Religion*](#). Ed. Wade Clark Roof. Vol. 2. New York: Macmillan Reference USA, 1999. p.471-474 (BB).

Week 4 (9/13, 9/15, 9/17)

Ancient Persia: Zoroastrianism

Reading: Oxtoby (Chapter 3: 158-188)

Week 5 (9/20, 9/22, 9/24)

Zoroastrianism Today

Reading: Oxtoby (Chapter 3: 188-199), "Zoroastrians Keep the Faith, and Keep Dwindling" (BB).

- Quiz I (Friday)

III. Abrahamic Traditions

Week 6 (9/27, 9/29, 10/1)

Biblical Judaism and Written Torah, Rabbinic Judaism and Oral Torah

Reading: Oxtoby 32-91 (optional 91-111)

Week 7 (10/4, 10/6, 10/8)

Judaism: Ritual (Jewish Observances), Holocaust and Theodicy

Reading: Oxtoby (111-157); selections from Elie Wiesel's *Night* (BB).

Optional: *Union Haggadah* (BB); selections from the biblical book of *Job* (BB).

- Midterm Essay: Post draft for peer review on BB (Monday), complete peer review (Wednesday), turn in revised midterm essay on BB (Friday).

Fall Break (10/11-10/12)

Week 8 (10/13, 10/15)

Research and Writing in Religious Studies

Reading: TBA

- *Research Paper:* Turn in Preparation Statement on research paper topic (Wednesday).
- *Library Workshop (Friday)*

Wednesday, October 13: Midterm deficiencies due

Friday, October 15: Last day for dropping course without academic penalty

Week 9 (10/18, 10/20, 10/22)

Christian Origins and Early Doctrinal Developments

Reading: Oxtoby 200-244

- *Research Paper:* Turn in worksheet “Discover Your Topic” (Monday) and first set of three annotations (Wednesday).

Week 10 (10/25, 10/27, 10/29)

Monastic Life, Protestantism, Fundamentalism

Reading: Oxtoby 244-339, selections from monastics (BB)

- *Research Paper:* Turn in annotated bibliography (Monday 10/25) and thesis statement/outline (Sunday 10/31)

Week 11 (11/1, 11/3, 11/5)

Islam as a Monotheistic Creed: Muhammad and the Qur’an

Reading: Oxtoby 340-383; Andrea Useem, “Islam, a Vocal Exercise of Faith,” *Chronicle of Higher Education* 47:13 (2000), A72.

Week 12 (11/8, 11/10, 11/12)

Variations within Islam: Sunni, Shi’i, Sufi Muslims

Reading: Oxtoby 383-461; Prologue to Rumi’s *Masnawi* (BB).

- *Quiz II (Friday, November 12)*

IV. Religion and Modernity

Week 13 (11/15, 11/17, 11/19)

Clash of Civilizations?

Reading: Samuel P. Huntington, “The Coming Clash of Civilizations” (BB) and at least one response to Huntington’s thesis (BB). Optional: Additional responses to Huntington (BB).

- *Research Paper:* Exchange draft of First Paper with peer group members (Wednesday); in-class peer review of drafts (Friday).

Week 14 (11/22)

11/22 Open Class

11/23 Turn in (revised) First Paper (BB)

11/24-11/28 Thanksgiving Recess

Week 15 (11/29, 12/1, 12/3)

Religion and Modernity: Focus on Baha'i

Reading: Oxtoby 462-509.

Last Day of Class (12/6): Evaluations and Review

- Research Paper: *Turn in Revised Research Paper (BB)*

Final Essay: The Final Essay is due on Blackboard no later than Monday, December 13 (5:00 p.m.).