RELS 289i: What Is Religion?

Mon/Wed 11-11:50

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Course Summary:

Academic study begins with definition. By defining our basic terms, we make sense of the subject we intend to study. We also reveal the seams that stitch that subject together and the points of discontinuity, imbalance, and disagreement that may be concealed in a more generalized treatment of the evidence.

Our attempt to define “religion” this semester is consequently not innocent. On the one hand, we want to know what religion is. What do people mean when they say, “I’m very religious”? Or, “I’m not at all religious”? What do academic experts on religion mean when they use the same term in much more specific and sometimes more confusing ways?

In this class, we will approach the subject of religion from a wide variety of perspectives. We will talk about religions, in the plural, meaning a series of specific traditions, each of which can be considered an example of a “religion.” But we will also ask and answer a series of pointed questions: is religion what happens inside a person’s heart (or mind, or conscience)? Does religion require belief? Is religion a fundamentally social thing? Is everyone “the same” in their experience of religion, or does religious experience range widely in the context of social, economic, political, and cultural norms?

This course is one of the new I-series courses currently being offered by the University, and it is consequently an experiment in investigation, imagination, and inspiration. Luckily, Religious Studies as a discipline could be described in precisely those terms. We will proceed together on this experiment, attempting to understand religions in the particular, the general, and their many analytic and interpretive frames.

This course fulfills the Human Cultural Diversity requirement of the CORE Liberal Arts and Sciences Studies Program, by providing exposure specifically to cultures or worldviews other than those that dominate in America and Europe.

Books:

Gwynne, *World Religions in Practice* (9781405167031)
Woodhead, *Christianity: A Very Short Introduction* (9780192803221)

All books are available at the University Book Center on campus. Additional readings, marked with *, are available on the electronic reserve system accessed through the ELMS website (www.elms.edu). Click on our class listing, then on Course Tools. Page down to Course Reserves, and you will find them there.
Responsibilities:

**Academic integrity** is assumed at all times. We will discuss the honor pledge in class, and I will expect you to write it on all written work. Honor violations will be taken extremely seriously. For more information, please see [http://www.studenthonorcouncil.umd.edu/whatis.html](http://www.studenthonorcouncil.umd.edu/whatis.html).

1. **Participation.** Please arrive on time, with relevant books in hand, having completed the assigned reading before the appropriate class session. Attendance will be taken. Please alert instructors in advance if you must be absent for reasons of religious observance. (10 pts.)

2. **Exams.** Two in-class midterm exams. (20 pts. each; 40 pts. total)

3. **Paper.** One paper (4-5 pages) on an assigned topic. (20 pts.)

4. **Final exam.** Cumulative essay exam on Saturday, May 15, from 8 to 10 a.m. Please let us know in the first week if you require an alternate exam date for religious reasons. (30 pts.)

Schedule:

1/25  Introduction

1/27  “What is Religion?”

2/1  Indigenous religions and “paganism”

2/3  -- Varieties of Religion

2/8  Hinduism 101

2/10  -- Religion and the Visual

2/15  Buddhism 101

2/17  -- Religion and Text

2/22  “It’s all about your values”

2/24  **EXERCISE 1**

3/1, 3/3  Judaism 101

3/8, 3/10  Christianity 101

3/15, 3/17  *Spring Break – no class session*

3/22, 3/34  Islam 101

3/29  “It’s all about the sacred”: Phenomenology

3/31, 4/5  *Passover – no class session*

4/7  Sacred time in context

4/12, 4/14  Insider, outsider, critic, or appreciator: How should we talk about religion? **Eck, “Is Our God Listening?”**

*McCutcheon, selections*
Two things you can’t escape in this world: What makes a life-cycle stage religious?  
SECOND EXERCISE DUE

RELIGION IN THE MIND AND THE BRAIN
*James, “Mysticism”  
*Boyer, selections

RELIGION AS EMBODIED EXPERIENCE
PAPER DUE

RETHINKING SACRED SPACE

What is religion?

Final exam: Saturday, May 15, from 8 to 10 a.m.  
Please let me know immediately if you require an alternate exam date for religious reasons.