

RS 100: Introduction to Religious Studies

California State University, Northridge
Fall 2014

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Office SN 419
Hours: Mondays 1-2 pm

Course Description

This course will introduce students to the discipline of Religious Studies, also known as Comparative Religion, and the major theories and methods the field employs. Using the tools of religious studies and self-inquiry, students will develop self-reflexivity for the study of others' religions, and evaluating truth claims. Emphasis will be put on the importance of *comparing* religions and acquiring the skills necessary to make comparisons in a scholarly way. Rather than focus on specific religious traditions or particular theorists, we will look at the questions, puzzles, and problems that scholars of religion have uncovered and how some unusual groups and practitioners illustrate these issues in contemporary life. Regardless of your religious affiliation, this course will provoke you to think differently about religious phenomena and the role of religion in society. The course has a tripartite structure: Preparation, Departure, and Integration.

Student Learning Objectives of the Religious Studies Department:

Study of the elements of religion and selected contemporary religious issues. Examines such subjects as myth and ritual, the sacred and profane, dreams and theophanies, priests and prophets, science and religion, history and religion, and the possibility of religious faith today.

1. Students will be able to recognize and to articulate (orally and in writing) the difference between an academic approach to religion and a personal, devotional approach.
2. Students will be able to demonstrate a *basic level of proficiency* in recognizing the major contributors to the modern study of religion and their models/theories from philosophy, theology, the history of religions, and the social sciences.
3. Students will be able to understand the following terms in their conventional, popular usage, and then discuss the variety of ways that religious studies scholars have critiqued, expanded, or problematized these: religion, religious, myth, ritual, symbol, philosophy, subjectivity, objectivity, secular/secularization, cult, sect, mysticism, theism, atheism, polytheism, monotheism, spirituality, magic, paganism, animism, canon, religious violence, post-colonialism, individualistic compared to community-based religions.
4. Students will be able to explain and give basic examples of the social function of religion with regard to gender, ethnicity, and nationality.
5. Students will be able to recognize religiosity in an aspect of modern culture such as different forms of media, art, music, films, politics, sports, and the public discourse on science.
6. Students will be able to demonstrate a *basic level of proficiency* in describing two

specific religious traditions (perhaps one from North America, one outside of it), including their historical development, major beliefs and practices, and demonstrate *a basic level of proficiency* in interpreting religious texts and rituals from each religious tradition.

General Education Student Learning Objectives, Arts and Humanities:

Goal: Students will understand the rich history and diversity of human knowledge, discourse and achievements of their own and other cultures as they are expressed in the arts, literatures, religions, and philosophy.

Students will:

1. Explain and reflect critically upon the human search for meaning, values, discourse and expression in one or more eras/stylistic periods or cultures;
2. Analyze, interpret, and reflect critically upon ideas of value, meaning, discourse and expression from a variety of perspectives from the arts and/or humanities;
3. Produce work/works of art that communicate to a diverse audience through a demonstrated understanding and fluency of expressive forms;
4. Demonstrate ability to engage and reflect upon their intellectual and creative development within the arts and humanities;
5. Use appropriate critical vocabulary to describe and analyze works of artistic expression, literature, philosophy, or religion and a comprehension of the historical context within which a body of work was created or a tradition emerged;
6. Describe and explain the historical and/or cultural context within which a body of work was created or a tradition emerged.

Course texts:

Comparing Religions: Coming to Terms by Jeffrey Kripal, et al. (Kindle version available)

Essays and Articles available on Moodle

Course Requirements

Grading:

Pop Quizzes	30% (5% each)
Mid-Term Exam	15%
Final Exam	25%
Question Paper	10%
Class Attendance and Participation	20%

92-100 = A	78-79 = C+
90-91 = A-	72-77 = C
88-89 = B+	70-71 = C-
82-88 = B	60-69 = D
80-81 = B-	Below 60 = F

Pop Quizzes will be administered 7 times throughout the quarter at the beginning of class. You may drop your lowest score and, for this reason, no make-up quizzes will be offered. You are required to come to class and arrive on time. In general you are required to complete the reading for the week before class on Monday. Quizzes will reflect this expectation.

Midterm and Final Exams will be short answer and essay questions.

Question Paper This short inquiry paper (2-5 pages) will ask you to reflect on your own reactions to the questions and themes raised in class. As an exercise in inquiry, two-thirds of all your sentences should be constructed in the interrogative. Start with a question and develop more questions. It may be turned in any time during the semester. More information about the Question Paper will be presented in class.

Class attendance and active participation: I highly value your verbal participation in the classroom. Getting better at articulating your thoughts through speech is one of the missions of the university and will provide a substantial portion of your grade in this class.

Final Exam: Wednesday, December 10 – 10:15 am – 12:15 pm

Other Requirements:

Respectful behavior towards yourself and others during all class-related activities. Course material will range over contentious topics over which there is wide disagreement in our society. It is imperative that we create a non-judgmental space in which to discuss and explore those topics that are also of great importance in an atmosphere of intellectual freedom without disrespecting others. You will be expected to engage in collegial debate with your instructor and peers without getting personal. We will have disagreements; you will be taught new tools to compare ideas but will never be told what to believe.

This also requires the respectful use of devices in the classroom. You are welcome to have course materials open on your tablet or phone during class discussions, or to take notes on your laptop, but do not engage in any other online communications/activities during class time as this will negatively impact your participation grade and distract your classmates.

Course schedule:

Section I: Preparation and Positioning

Week 1: Introduction: Thinking socially about the religious; thinking religiously about the social
Aug. 25/27 "Body Ritual among the Nacirema" article on Moodle

Week 2: Labor Day Holiday—No class Monday
Sept. 1/3 Preparation: Comparative Practices in Global History
Introduction and Chapter 1 in textbook

Week 3: History of Comparative Religion in the Western Academy:
Sept 8/10 Major Figures, major consequences
Chapter 2

Week 4: Sept 15/17	Reflexivity and Comparison: Human nature, memory, sameness, and difference. Pitfalls in the study of religion. Defining Religion. Chapter 3
Section II: Week 5: Sept 22/24	Departure on an intellectual odyssey Traveling to Comparative Horizons. Myth and Ritual Chapter 4
Week 6: Sept 29/1	The natural world: Comparing Religious Views of Nature and Science Chapter 5
Week 7: Oct 6 Oct 8	Comparing Religious views on Human Sexuality, Gender, and the Body Chapter 6 Midterm
Week 8: Oct 13/15	Diaspora and Healing Readings available on Moodle
Week 9: Oct 20/22	Comparing Religious views on extraordinary people with extraordinary power Chapter 7
Week 10: Oct 27/29	The Paradox: Images, Symbols, and the Religious Imagination Chapter 8
Week 11: Nov 3/5	Explaining the world: Comparing Religious views on death, salvation, and end-times. Chapter 9
Section III: Week 12: Nov 10/12	Homecoming and Integration Re-reading Religion at home, Theological Traditions Chapter 10
Week 13: Nov 17/19	Rational Re-reading: Skepticism and Reductionism Chapter 11
Week 14: Nov 24/26	Reflexive Re-readings Chapter 12 Thanksgiving Holiday
Week 15 Dec 1/3	Reading contemporary phenomena Further Readings available on Moodle Question Paper Due

Dec 8
Dec 10

Review and Evaluations
Final Exam 10:15 am – 12:15 pm