RS 100: Introduction to Religious Studies

California State University, Northridge

MW 11:00-12:15 SH 384 13502 Spring 2015

Instructor: Brian Clearwater

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818-677-6878 Hours: Mondays 12:45-1:45 pm

Wed. 3:30-5:00 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:

Quizzes (3) 20%

Mid-Term Exam 25%

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

**Quizzes** will be administered 3 times throughout the semester at the beginning of class. You may make-up quizzes that you fail. You are required to come to class and arrive on time. In general you are required to complete the reading before class. 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**: May 13 – 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

Jan. 21 What is Religion?

Week 2: Foundations

Jan. 26 Film: “[A Personal Philosophy](http://suncat.csun.edu/record=b2903934)” with Huston Smith, Bill Moyers

Jan. 28 Malory Nye, *Religion: The Basics.* Chapter 1 in Moodle

Week 3: History of Comparative Religion in the Western Academy:

Major Figures, major consequences

Feb. 2 Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return* excerpt

Feb. 4 “Body Ritual among the Nacirema" article on Moodle

Week 4: Reflexivity and Comparison: Human nature, memory, sameness, and difference. Pitfalls in the study of religion. Defining Religion.

Feb. 9 Kripal, *Comparing Religions,* Chapter 3, pp. 79-91

Feb. 11 Chapter 3, pp. 92-106 (**Quiz 1**)

Week 5: Developing Reflexivity

Feb. 16 **Position paper due**, reflexivity exercise in class

Feb. 18 Film: *The Power of Myth* with Joseph Campbell

**Section II: Departure on an intellectual odyssey**

Week 6: Traveling to Comparative Horizons: Myth and Ritual

Feb. 23 Myth: Chapter 4, pp. 111-124

Feb. 25 Ritual: Chapter 4, pp. 125-139

Week 7: The Natural World: Comparing Religious Views of Nature and Science

Mar. 2 Chapter 5, pp. 143-158

Mar. 4 Chapter 5, pp. 159-173

Week 8: Introducing Religion and Sexuality

Mar. 9 Film: *Flirting with Danger: Power & Choice in Heterosexual Relationships*

Mar. 11 **Midterm**

Week 9: Comparing Religious views on Human Sexuality, Gender, and the Body. Consent as a comparative category.

Mar. 16 Chapter 6, pp. 177-191

Mar. 18 Chapter 6, pp. 192-205

Week 10: Comparing Religious views on extraordinary people with extraordinary power and The Paranormal

Mar. 23 Chapter 7, pp. 226-235 and Chapter 8, pp. 240-252

Mar. 25 Chapter 8, pp. 253-267 (**Quiz 2)**

Week 11: Explaining the world: Comparing Religious views on death, salvation, and end-times.

Mar. 30 Chapter 9, pp. 271-284

Apr. 1 Chapter 9, pp. 285-296

**Question Paper Due**

Apr. 6-11 Spring Break

**Section III: Homecoming and Integration**

Week 12: Re-reading Religion at home, Theological Traditions

Apr. 13 Chapter 10, pp. 299-316

Apr. 15 Chapter 10, pp. 317-331 (**Quiz 3**)

Week 13: Rational Re-reading: Skepticism and Reductionism

Apr. 20 Chapter 11, pp. 335-348

Apr. 22 Chapter 11, pp. 349-361

Week 14: Reflexive Re-readings: Looking at the looker

Apr. 27 No class meeting. Chapter 12, pp. 365-374

Apr. 29 Chapter 12, pp. 375-383

Thanksgiving Holiday

Week 15 Reading contemporary phenomena

May 4 Chapter 12, pp. 383-392

May 6 Epilogue, pp. 397-399

May 13 **Final Exam** 10:15 am – 12:15 pm