

RS310 Religion and Literature—Fully Online

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RS 310: Religion and Literature (S2 GE)

This course could in all likelihood be the most fun you will ever have in a college course. If you enjoy reading great stories, impressing your friends with new and sexy concepts (whether at cocktail parties, health club, church, mosque, synagogue, or ashram), and working with computers, then this course is for you. The class will be conducted entirely online in place of regular class meetings.

In this course we focus upon literature as evidence of the tenacity of religious paradigms in contemporary culture. The range of our considerations will include everything from primary religious literature as encoded in scripture and in the deep-structure religious paradigms at the core of cultures to contemporary fiction and cinema as a way of doing "cultural archeology" to unearth various strata of religious themes, dimensions, insights and/or phenomena embedded there. The argument and exploration of this course will be based on the premise that "in the history of religions there are only documents and interpreters." We will test that premise over a vast span of literary genres and cinematic works in the context of contemporary social and literary multi-culturalism. Such themes as the identity and purpose of humanity, the problems of suffering, ethics, the quests for ultimate meaning, significance, authenticity, and transcendence; the prophetic critiques of society and power; horror and the holy, wisdom, courage, destiny, providence, and the silence of God will be among the topics of focus in this course.

Student Learning Outcomes

Here are the Official Department SLOs for RS 310 as stated on the Religious Studies Website:

1. Students will demonstrate familiarity with the elementary terms, tools and usages of at least one contemporary theory of literary interpretation.
2. Students will be able to discern how a religious tradition, or a lack of one, affects an author's understanding of human existence.
3. Students will define the concepts of "religion" and "religious" as they particularly apply to literature.
4. Students will articulate the influence of diverse religious values, myths, stories and beliefs on literary expressions, such as sagas, novels, poems, short stories, plays and sacred texts.

5. Students will express awareness of how translation is invariably an interpretation, and how translations/interpretations affect readers' understanding of a literary work as well as its potential religious impact;

6. Students will understand how various literary portrayals of awesome or extraordinary experiences such as ecstasy, mental suffering, loss of faith, emergence of faith, transcendent courage, and paralyzing fear, may be understood as expressions of diverse religious traditions.

In my Interpretation of the above stated Outcomes, You will learn:

- How religious paradigms, even when apparent adherence to any concrete tradition seems to be absent, influence writers' probings of the human condition, existence, and transcendence.
- To recognize the discrete and particular tenets borrowed from or analogous to a wide variety of religious phenomena reflected in a vast array of the world religions.
- To recognize "paradigms in motion" and to identify and isolate their trajectories along the trace-trails of their origins, incubation zones, intersections of transmission, pivotal junctures, and resting repositories.
- To pay attention to the particularities and nuances of paradigms and phenomena inherent in the Abrahamic Religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) and/or their Mediterranean pre-histories, contexts, and multi-splendored splinters and spinoffs such as Zoroastrianism, Neo-Platonism, Gnosticism, Humanism, Atheism, or New Age Thought, as well as other religious precepts such as are found, for example in Yoga, Zen, Daoism, indigenous and pre-historic patterns and paradigms.
- To utilize elementary terms, tools and techniques of contemporary theories of literary interpretation.
- To discern the subtle influences of interpretation translations can exercise on readers' understandings.
- New ways to talk about "religion" and "the religious" particularly in regards to literature but as well in the larger context of contemporary culture as expressed in media, art, music, films, politics, sports, and public discourses on science.
- To appreciate literary portrayals of the awesomely numinous or otherwise extraordinary experiences of transcendent breakthroughs or deconstructed worldviews; agony and ecstasy, traumatic or transformative paradigm shifts; loss/emergence of trust, hope love; moments of ephemeral bliss or abject horror; paralyzing emotional eclipses or liberating glimpses of the Unity of Reality; amnesia/ anamnesis; spectacular skepticisms or great leaps of faith.
- To become fluent, or at least conversant, in a variety of diverse religious values, paradigms, patterns, and practices as they manifest in multiple literary genres such as myths, scripture, epics, sagas, folk tales, fairytales, short stories, novels, poems, songs, movies, plays and other narrative vehicles such as jokes and anecdotes.
- To become a much more interesting human being, global citizen, and conversation partner whether as a participant at a party or an executive retreat, whether as a poet, priest, politician, pedagogue, patron of the arts, PTA president, or simply a lifelong learner.
- To understand and interpret everything you just read.

General Education

Student Learning Outcomes

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.

REQUIRED TEXTS:

(Available through the bookstore or via online booksellers)

The World Is Made of Stories by David R Loy, Wisdom Publications 978-0861716159

Sacred Terror: Religion and Horror on the Silver Screen, by Douglas E. Cowan; Baylor University Press (October 1, 2008) 978-1-60-258018-3

Holy Clues: The Gospel According to Sherlock Holmes by [Stephen Kendrick](#) Vintage; Reprint edition 978-0375703386

The Gospel according to Science Fiction: From the Twilight Zone to the Final Frontier by [Gabriel McKee](#) Westminster John Knox Press (January 1, 2007) 978-0664229016

OTHER TEXTS: There are a variety of other readings we will use for this course, some of them required and others will be chosen by you. Many of the texts we will be reading as a class are available online or easily obtained from local libraries or bookstores. For example, to get us started I have included some links to the Gilgamesh Epic and works by Edgar Allen Poe and Franz Kafka which can be read online or printed. I will also expect you to read some Sherlock Holmes stories and some science fiction which will be determined later.

VIDEOS (to be viewed): You will have to view some videos (or TV shows) which will primarily have to be rented from a video store, though some may be available in libraries, on cable, or even online. I will post either the particular video I want you to watch or the type of genre of video I would like you to pursue in an appropriately

timely fashion. Here are some examples of the types of videos I have in mind. *The Matrix; Jesus of Montreal; Babette's Feast; Harry Potter; The Lord of the Rings; The Chronicles of Narnia; The Milagro Beanfield War; Being There; Interview with a Vampire; TrueBlood; Lost; The Day the Earth Stood Still; etc...*

COURSE REQUIREMENTS:

Reading assignments, BulletinBoard postings, and other web-based participation. This course will be writing intensive. mid-term examination, one term paper on a relevant topic of your choice, one final-examination, and, of course, good mental hygiene. All reading assignments will be posted in a timely fashion.

THE TERM PAPER: The major topic of your paper will pertain to the main course subject, "Religion and Literature." However, within that large, over-arching umbrella, the particular choice of paper topics has a wide range of flexibility in the hopes that the students will pursue subjects that command their interests and spark their imaginations. You will want to begin exploring possible topics from practically the beginning of the course and should not only feel free but consider it a necessary step in your preparation to consult the instructor concerning your topic. Various strategies for generating a viable topic are discussed on a webpage appropriately titled "The Research Paper" on our course page. As upper division students, you are naturally expected to write a much more expansive research paper than lower division students due to your advanced sophistication and greater academic preparation.

Assignments and grading criteria: Preparation and class participation are factored into the grading. Some class meetings may be scheduled online at various times to accommodate a variety of schedules. Most of the work, however can be posted at your convenience. Thoughtfulness and preparation in your interaction with the thoughts and postings of your fellow classmates will make your sojourn through "Religion and Literature" a much richer experience than you will have had in a traditional course. As a participant in this course, you become part of the course. This cannot be emphasized enough. The mid-term accounts for approximately 20% of your grade, the final about 20%, and the research paper 30% with 30% based on class participation (web assignments).

Assignment and Reading Schedule

There are basically four types of assignments: reading, viewing, exercising/assessing, and feedback. Since this is a fully online course, you are already at least 3 hours ahead of the game by not having to come to class. A general rule of thumb for assignment hours for outside homework such as reading and projects has generally been something like 3 hours a week per unit. So, you owe time to this course (minimum 10 hours per week though if you are diligent it will probably be less). As far as completion of BB assignments, generally a week's turnaround unless otherwise posted is a good rule for "timeliness" but definitely within two weeks of the posted date is more than enough. You should check the homepage regularly for updates and there should be no excuse for falling behind. (In Grad School it is not uncommon to have to read 2-5 books a week, so, no wonder you get no compassion from your professors, eh?) At any rate, I have tried to set up this course so you can work at your own pace, but generally that means that the industrious can loom ahead, it is not an opportunity for the slackard/laggard to fall behind. I know work and sleep can get in the way, but think of it this way: Better to be a sleep deprived and haggard bragard with your work all done, than a slacker-lagger wagging your toungue and crying in your beer because you thought you thought you needed fun over progress... There is a German proverb

“Morgen, morgen, nur nicht heute, sagen alle faulen Leute.” (“Tomorrow, tomorrow, just not today, that's what all the lazy people say.”) Don't fall into that trap. Hopefully, a word to the wise is sufficient.

Reading: Reading in a university course is of course a given. We will read material at a regular pace dealing with the various religions we are covering. There are textbooks for the course which we will read straight through, cover to cover in well-paced increments. However, you may want to read ahead so as to be prepared for the sophisticated concepts you may encounter. We will also be reading each other's BulletinBoard Discussion postings and various outside resources (internet articles and the like).

Exercising/Assessing: This involves utilization of the various online supplements which are geared towards greater understanding of the material.

Viewing: Part of your responsibilities for this course will be to watch videos, easily obtainable at your local video store, from the library, or even online.

Feedback: You will be given several opportunities to reflect on, comment upon, and analyze the reading and viewing material in this course. Not the least of these forums will be provided by the use of a computer either at home or in a lab. Thus, part of your course preparation will be to take the time to become online-ready. I will try to help you get there. However, you are ultimately responsible to compose and send email, post messages via WebCt's bulletinboard, and perhaps even attend virtual class meetings online in realtime (more about this option later). The ultimate form of feedback will be a research paper you will write on some aspect of world religions.

Week One: This course is driven by the Bulletin Boards, so the key to this course is to check back regularly and to stay current with your reading, viewing, reflections, and postings. You can get started by reading the syllabus and by posting in the first set of bulletin boards. In Week One you should have introduced your self and dived in to one of the most ancient stories we have recorded, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (Posted Online)

Week Two: Welcome back from your weekend respites, relaxations, and/or “other distractions.” This week should be dedicated to some serious command of vocabulary and concepts for locating, understanding, and discussing “religion/s.” Jump through the hoops of the “Methods and Madness” exercises described in the third bulletin board forum, and I promise you will feel much better when you are done. Start reading *The World is Made of Stories*.

Weeks Three and Four: The Methods and Madness exercise needs to be completed, as well as the reading and posting on *The World is Made of Stories*.

Week Five is the time to view some Elluminate/Collaborate archives recorded in previous semesters. Ignore any anachronistic information, but try to extract some of the more meaningful interpretations of the relationship of Religion and Literature. Of course I want to see what you think in the BB forum.

Weeks six through Eight: This marks the official mid-point of the semester. Theoretically you should be halfway through the readings and bulletin boards for the course. Set your sites on getting through to the Kafka readings (posted online). It will be a mind-expanding experience.

Weeks nine through twelve: Congratulations for hanging in there! It suddenly is an appropriate time of the year to consider "Horror and the Holy," yes? Anyways, welcome to the post-midpoint of the semester. It is time to shift your time-management into high gear. Many of you still need to "Ponder Poe" and figure out "what the Kafka is going on." As well, the remaining textbooks are fairly hefty. So, if you have not already, start reading *Sacred Terror*. Take a look at the remaining BulletinBoards so you have a firm grasp of what you are expected to do through the end of the semester, and get on with it! This is a good time to consider your adult level time-management skills. According to my suggested timeline, you should have selected your approach to the "Mystery" genre. You are indeed more fortunate than previous classes in the return of Sherlock Holmes to the popular imagination and media.

Weeks thirteen through fifteen: It is time to wrap things up, finish the readings, particularly *The Gospel According to Science Fiction*, post in all the bulletin boards, and present us with your term writing project. I will post a ridiculously brief final exam which you will need to finish by the end of finals week.