

Gods, Myths, and Religions in a Secular Age

01:840:101

T/Th 2.15-3.35 Hickman Hall 211 (Douglass Campus)

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Office Hours: MTh 4.00-5.00 and by appointment

Loree Classroom Building 110

Overview:

We are living in a secular age—or so we are often told—in which gods, myths, and religions have been relegated to the sidelines of public life (and sometimes superseded entirely). This course problematizes that thesis by interrogating the idea of the secular, by exploring the persistence and pervasiveness of religion, and by complicating facile definitions of “gods,” “myth,” and “religion.” Gods, myths, and religions have vast and far-reaching implications in the contemporary world, and this course offers students some crucial tools for analyzing those implications.

This course offers an introduction to the academic study of religion both through explorations of key dilemmas in religious studies as well as through examinations of texts, traditions, ideas, values, discourses, practices, and communities.

Grade Breakdown:

1. **Participation (20%)**—You are expected to prepare for, attend, and participate in every class period. Failure to prepare, attend, or participate will negatively affect your grade. Preparation includes having all readings accessible either in print or downloaded on an electronic device so that they are accessible offline at the very beginning of class. For more information, see “Assignment Instructions” below.
2. **Homework (40%)**— For every week of class, you will need to write at least one Forum post on Sakai. For more information, see “Assignment Instructions” below.
3. **Worldview Analysis (10%)**—You will analyze your own worldview, on the model of Ninian Smart. Due via the “Assignments” tab on Sakai by 11:59pm on February 10. For more information, see “Assignment Instructions” below.
4. **Midterm (10%)**—This midterm exam is essay-based: you will receive three topics in advance, of which you will choose two to write about. You will be given time during the class period to write these exams, but you may choose to write them ahead of time.
5. **Final Exam (20%)**—The Final Exam is actually an extension of your midterm. After the midterm, you will receive feedback both from me and from your classmates which you should use to improve your initial responses, and you will also have to incorporate material from the second half of class.

Objectives:

Students will:

- Develop global and local cultural literacy by learning how to identify, approach, and interpret religious traditions, practices, and discourses.
- Cultivate an awareness of the variety, complexity, and ubiquity of religious worldviews.
- Enhance their grasp of the critical analytical skills required for questioning broadly held assumptions and conventional wisdom about religion, culture, and the secular.
- Acquire and exercise methodological tools for analyzing religious traditions.
- Refine their reading skills to appreciate the nuances, preoccupations, and assumptions of religious literature and expression (as well as of those writing about religion!).

- Gain an appreciation for the variety of human experiences and worldviews.

Readings:

- All readings are available, numbered, on Sakai under “Resources.”

Schedule of Readings and Assignments			
Day	Date	Class Theme	Readings/Assignments
Week 1: Introduction			
1	1/17	Introduction to Class, Part I: What are we talking about?	<i>No Readings Due</i>
2	1/19	Introduction to Class, Part II: How should we talk about it?	1. Charlotte Allen, “Is Nothing Sacred?” (excerpts) 2. J. Z. Smith, “The Devil in Mr. Jones”
Week 2: Studying Religion—What is it?			
3	1/24	Let’s start at the very beginning...	3. Kessler on Tylor, Frazer, Freud, and Boyer 4. Genesis 1-3 5. Rig Veda, “The Hymn of Man” and “Creation Hymn”
4	1/26	Religion and/as Experience	6. Kessler on Otto, Eliade, and James 7. Rabi’a (selections) 8. Margery Kempe <i>The Book of Margery Kempe</i> (selection)
Week 3: Studying Religion—How does it function?			
5	1/31	Religion and/as Society	9. Kessler on Durkheim, Marx, Geertz, and Smart 10. Ninian Smart, <i>The World’s Religions</i> , 10-26
6	2/2	Worldviews	11. Rachel Held Evans, <i>Searching for Sunday</i> , 6-16 12. bell hooks, “Contemplation and Transformation” 13. Tulsi Gabbard, Interview (<i>India Abroad</i> , November 2, 2012)
Week 4: Studying Religion in a Secular Age...			
7	2/7	Or not.	14. Richard Dawkins, <i>The God Delusion</i> , 31-50 15. Tom Bartlett, “Dusting off God” 16. Tenzan Eaghll, “Dear Richard Dawkins”
8	2/9	Or maybe?	17. Hugh Heclo, “Is America a Christian Nation?” 18. Richard J. Mouw, “Religious Convictions and Public Discourse,” 212-14. <i>Worldview Analysis due 2/10 at 11:59pm via Sakai</i>
Week 5: Gods, Myths, and Religions in the Roman Saeculum			
9	2/14	Roman Religion: Olympians, Mystery Religions, Magic	19. Mary Beard, et al., <i>Religions of Rome</i> , 148-165 (“Sacrifices”) 20. Antonia Tripolitis, <i>Religions of the Hellenistic-Roman Age</i> , 9-35 21. Kimberly B. Stratton, “The Mithras Liturgy and <i>Sepher Ha Razim</i> ”
10	2/16	Roman Religion: Stoicism, Epicureanism, Middle Platonism, and Skepticism	22. Antonia Tripolitis, <i>Religions of the Hellenistic-Roman Age</i> , 36-46. 23. Cleanthes, <i>Hymn to Zeus</i> AND 24. Marcus Aurelius, <i>Meditations</i> Books 4-5 OR 25. Lucretius, <i>On the Nature of Things</i> , Book 1

Week 6: Myth			
11	2/21	Gender, Myth, and Religion	26. Bruce Lincoln, <i>Discourse and the Construction of Society</i> , 23-6 27. Genesis 2-3 28. Phyllis Trible, "Eve and Adam: Genesis 2-3 Re-Read"
12	2/23	Race, Myth, and Religion	29. Paul Harvey, "A Servant of Servants Shall He Be" 30. Eddie Glaude, Jr., "Myth and African American Self-Identity"
Week 7: Gods and Humans			
13	2/28	Sacred Power	31. Gary Kessler, <i>Studying Religion: An Introduction Through Cases</i> , 38-59
14	3/2	Relating to God: Pietism and Deism	32. Charles Wesley, Hymns (selected) 33. Jonathan Edwards, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." 34. Thomas Jefferson, Syllabus and Summary of the Jefferson Bible.
Week 8: Gods and Goodness			
15	3/7	Theodicy	35. John Kelsay and Lawrence S. Cunningham, <i>The Sacred Quest</i> , 101-115 ("The Problem of Evil") 36. Shanell T. Smith, "A Christian Band-Aid"
16	3/9	Midterm	<i>Midterm Exam In Class</i>
Spring Recess			
Week 9: Religio			
17	3/21	Sacrifice	37. Mary Beard, et al., <i>Religions of Rome</i> , 148-165 ("Sacrifices"—revisit) 38. Nicole Karapanagiotis, "Vaishnava Cyber-Pūjā: Problems Of Purity & Novel Ritual Solutions"
18	3/23	Asceticism	39. Jason David BeDuhn, "Manichaeism" 40. Gavin Flood, <i>The Ascetic Self</i> , 72-89 41. Yoga Sutra (selections)
Week 10: Religio			
19	3/28	Ritual, Power, and <i>Habitus</i>	42. Saba Mahmood, "Positive Ethics and Ritual Conventions" (selection) 43. Mallory Nye on Foucault and Bordieu
20	3/30	Ethics	44. W. David Solomon, "Normative Ethical Theories" 45. Cheryl Cottine on Role Ethics and Confucianism
Week 11: Relegere			
21	4/4	Texts and Interpretation	46. Andrew Sullivan, "Unnatural Law" 47. Bruce Chilton, "The Eucharist and the Mimesis of Sacrifice" 48. Bernie Fox (Orthodox Union), Comments on Midrashim
22	4/6	Contemplation and Consideration	49. <i>Bhagavad Gita</i> , Teachings 2, 11, and 12 50. Bernard of Clairvaux, <i>On Consideration</i> (excerpts)
Week 12: Relegere			
23	4/11	Rethinking Reality	51. Zhuangzi, "Butterfly Dream" 52. Gospel of Thomas (selected logia) 53. "The Three Marks of Existence"
24	4/13	Rethinking Reality	54. Mary Baker Eddy, <i>Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures</i> (excerpt) 55. Nancy Pearcey, <i>Total Truth: Liberating Christianity from Its Cultural Captivity</i> (excerpt)

Week 13: In a Secular Age?			
25	4/18	America's Religion	56. Robert N. Bellah, "Civil Religion in America" 57. Katherine Meizel, "A Singing Citizenry" 58. Music videos posted on Sakai: - "God Bless the USA" - "God Bless America" - "Power and Glory" - "Welcome to America"
26	4/20	America's Religions	59. Kathryn Lofton, "The Celebrification of Religion in the Age of Infotainment" 60. Tara Isabella Burton, "Apocalypse Whatever: The Making of a Racist, Sexist Religion of Nihilism on 4Chan"
Week 14: Revisiting the Secular; Reflection on Religion			
27	4/25	Revisiting the Secular	61. Saba Mahmood, "Religious Reason and Secular Affect: An Incommensurable Divide?"
28	4/27	Is ISIS Islamic?	62. Graeme Wood, "What ISIS Really Wants" 63. Jack Jenkins, "What The Atlantic Gets Dangerously Wrong About ISIS and Islam." 64. Excerpts from <i>Dabiq</i> and <i>Rumiyyah</i>
FINAL EXAM Friday May 5, 8-11am in Hickman Hall 211			

Assignment Instructions

1. Participation:

- a. Your participation in each class will be graded on a 4-point scale.
- b. Showing up after attendance has been taken will result in a 1-point deduction from that day's participation grade.
- c. Not having your texts ready to go when class begins, evincing unpreparedness when asked a question in class, or being inattentive in class (dozing, reading a newspaper, doing work for another class, etc.) will result in a 2-point deduction from that day's participation grade.
- d. Distracting other students from the class discussion will result in a 0 for that day's participation grade.
- e. Four classes will be excused without documentation (i.e. your four lowest participation grades will be dropped).
- f. If you miss class due to a documented difficulty, you can get 2 points for classes that you have missed if you show me documentation.

2. Homework Assignments: Original and Response Posts on Sakai Forums

- a. Under "Forums" in Sakai there is a Forum for every week of class. You must post in the current week's forum once per week, in response to another student's thread. For 3 classes (which you will sign up for in the first week of class), you must originate a thread.
 - i. **Original Posts:** Once per week you will originate a thread. This must be posted by 12:00am the night before class.
 - Your post may be a comment, question, rant, poem, or thought experiment, but it must include quotations from at least one of the texts assigned for that day.

- ❖ I highly recommend giving your post an illustrative and compelling title, so your classmates want to click through and read your comment.
 - ❖ While these are not essays, they should have a foregrounded thesis or a take-away point or question that your classmates can easily discern. In other words, to be intelligible, these posts must be focused.
 - ❖ While there is no set word-count, a post that is shorter than 500 words is unlikely to be in-depth enough to satisfy the rubric criteria and a post that is longer than 1000 words is unlikely to be focused enough to satisfy the rubric criteria.
- Each assignment will be graded on a 5-point scale according to the following rubric:

Grade	Criteria
5	Thoughtful, insightful, thorough, and focused, with excellent choice of quotes, excellent use of quotes, and clear, elegant writing.
4	Thoughtful and focused, with good choice and use of quotes and clear writing.
3	Thoughtful but unclear or confused, with passable choice and use of quotes.
2	Unclear or confused, with questionable or insufficient use of quotes.
1	Unclear or confused, with questionable or insufficient use of quotes, demonstrating serious misconceptions and/or minimal effort.
0	No assignment submitted by deadline

- ii. **Response Posts:** Once per week (even on the weeks that you have originated a thread) you will respond to another student's post. Your response must be posted by noon on the day of class.
 - Your post may be a comment, question, rant, or thought experiment, but it must engage with both the original post and the material for that day's class.
 - ❖ i.e. You cannot just say "Good job!" or "I agree!"—You must further the discussion and add insights of your own, without going too far afield from the day's readings.
 - Your lowest 4 grades will be dropped, and each response will be graded on a 5-point scale according to the following rubric:

Grade	Criteria
5	Thoughtful, clear, and insightful, with excellent and respectful engagement with the material and your classmates' comments. The response is clear and elegantly written.
4	Thoughtful and clear, with good, respectful engagement with the material and your classmates' comments. The writing is easily intelligible.
3	Thoughtful but unclear or confused, with passable but respectful engagement with the material.
2	Unclear or confused.
1	Unclear or confused, demonstrating serious misconceptions, minimal effort, and/or disrespect for your classmates.
0	No assignment submitted by deadline.

- b. **Questions:** If you are passionate about something (or just plain confused about it) and you want to test out your ideas on me before sharing it with your classmates, you may, instead of a Forum response post, email me a question or something you want to address about the readings or what is happening in class. To be clear: you may always email me, for any reason at all, but a few times in the semester a thoughtful email will count as an assignment and you will receive credit for it. This is, essentially, a venue for asking questions or making comments without all of your classmates seeing it, and thus not something to be done frequently.

3. Worldview Analysis:

- a. Explore your own worldview in 4-6 pages (double-spaced, one-inch margins, 12 point font, approximately 2000 words), using all seven dimensions described by Smart.
- b. You may look at any of your operative worldviews, or several combined, or your overall amalgamated worldview. The worldview you choose does not have to be a religious one, but (since it is a worldview) it must be in some way meaningful and constitutive of meaning for you.¹ Essentially, I want you to look at the way you look at the world with the same critical lens you might apply to the experiences of others.
- c. Your introduction should explain what worldview you have chosen and why you have chosen it.
- d. You should then have seven body paragraphs in which you focus on one dimension of your worldview, identify illustrative examples, describe them, and explain them. If there is a dimension that is not well represented in your worldview, that is fine: you must note that and discuss what its absence might mean for your worldview as a whole.
- e. Your concluding section should evaluate the process of identifying your own worldview: was it difficult? Was it easy? Would it have been easier or more difficult to evaluate someone else's worldview? What hurdles did you have to overcome, and how did you overcome them? Would you recognize yourself from this worldview?
- f. Each assignment will be graded on a 100-point scale using the following rubric:

Letter Grade	Point Grade	Criteria
A+	100	Addresses all worldview dimensions thoroughly, insightfully, and clearly. Examples are well chosen, well described, and well defended. The analysis is engaged and thoughtful, the writing is clear, and there are no typographical or syntactical errors.
A	95	Addresses all worldview dimensions thoroughly, insightfully, and clearly. Examples are well chosen, well described, and well defended. The analysis is engaged and thoughtful, and the writing is clear.
A-	90	Addresses all worldview dimensions thoroughly and clearly. Examples are well chosen, well described, and well defended. The analysis is engaged and thoughtful, though the writing is occasionally unclear.
B+	89	Addresses all worldview dimensions thoroughly, though with moments of unclarity. Examples are well chosen and well described. The analysis is engaged and thoughtful, though the writing is occasionally unclear.
B	85	Addresses all worldview dimensions, though with moments of unclarity. Examples are well chosen and well described. The analysis is thoughtful, though the writing is occasionally unclear.
B-	80	Addresses all worldview dimensions briefly, though with moments of unclarity. Examples are well chosen, but less well described. The analysis is thoughtful, though the writing is occasionally unclear.
C+	79	Addresses all worldview dimensions briefly, though with moments of unclarity. Examples are well chosen, but not described. The analysis is thoughtful, though the writing is occasionally unclear.
C	75	Addresses all worldview dimensions briefly, but with a lack of clarity. Examples are well

¹ For example, students have used religious traditions (Conservative Judaism, Irish Catholicism, Greek Orthodoxy, Pentecostalism, Quakerism, Islam, Secular Humanism), political affiliations (Communist, Republican, Democrat), sports fandom (Indiana Basketball), sports participation (field hockey, fencing), school affiliation (Yay Rutgers!), family identity (what it means to be a Kendall), national identity (American, Greek, Malaysian in America), activism/advocacy (pro-life, pro-choice, environmentalism, anti-poverty work), psychology (optimist/pessimist, attachment style), or personal philosophy (self-reliance, kindness), to name a few.

		chosen, but not described. The analysis is superficial.
C-	70	Addresses all worldview dimensions briefly, but with a lack of clarity. The quality of the examples is inconsistent, and the analysis is superficial.
D+	69	Addresses all worldview dimensions briefly, but with a lack of clarity and confusion apparent. The quality of the examples is inconsistent, and the analysis is superficial.
D	65	Addresses all worldview dimensions briefly, but with the student's confusion apparent. The quality of the examples is poor, and the analysis is superficial.
D-	60	Addresses all worldview dimensions briefly, but with the student's confusion apparent. The quality of the examples is poor, and there is no analysis.
F	0-59	No plausible assignment submitted by the deadline (if the assignment does not deal with all seven worldview dimensions in some fashion, the assignment will receive an F)

Classroom Policies:

1. **Civility:** This semester we will at times be discussing most of the things you are not supposed to discuss in polite company. In order to ensure that everyone feels comfortable participating in these discussions, we must all show respect to one another, to one another's ideas, and to the material we are discussing. Dismissive or abusive comments will not be tolerated.
2. **Academic Integrity:** Rutgers has strict policies regarding academic integrity, with which you must be familiar. They can be found here: <http://academicintegrity.rutgers.edu/academic-integrity-policy/>. My only addition to this policy is a reminder: no matter how small the assignment or assignment component (a forum post, a quiz response, one sentence in a 5-page essay, etc.), **all** work that you submit in this class must be your own. If you have received help on an assignment, that is fine—but you must acknowledge that help (even if you are using a translation service). If you plagiarize on any part of any assignment, you will receive a zero on that assignment and receive a warning from me. If it happens again, no matter how insignificant the infraction, you will receive a failing grade in the course and I will submit a disciplinary report to the University that could result in your expulsion from Rutgers.
3. **Technology:** Any and all technology is welcome in the classroom, with a few caveats:
 - a. **All texts must be available to you at the beginning of the class period.** Whether that means printing them out or downloading them so they are ready to go on whichever devices you intend to use, you must have all of the day's readings accessible for your reference during class. You should be able to reference texts easily, without having to wait for a page to load. Not having your texts ready to go at the start of class is akin to coming to class unprepared, and your participation grade may suffer accordingly.
 - b. **Do not become distracted.** If I notice that you are distracted, you will lose half of your participation points for the day.
 - c. **Do not distract your classmates.** If I notice that you are distracting your classmates, you will lose all of your participation points for the day. If you are being distracted by another student, please let me know so that I can let them know they are being distracting.