

## The Birth and Death of God from Mesopotamia to Postmodernity

840:115 online course

Professor Ballentine  
[Debra.Ballentine@rutgers.edu](mailto:Debra.Ballentine@rutgers.edu)

online office hr: Fridays TBD  
virtual/phone meeting by appointment

Across the Humanities, we study human cultural products. The academic study of religion focuses on human cultural products that pertain to entities, places, and things that are presented as transcendent, divine, sacred, holy, otherworldly, universal, etc. This course analyzes diverse characterizations of gods, from our earliest Mesopotamian myths, through early Jewish, Christian, and Muslim theologies, Medieval times, the Enlightenment, Modernity, and into Postmodernity. How have divine beings been characterized? How has the idea of god developed over time, and in relation to what cultural developments? We will begin with how gods are born in ancient Near Eastern traditions, how gods are organized into family and political structures in ancient pantheons, and the notion of there being one “Most High” god who is king of other divine beings. We will continue with early Jewish, Christian, and Muslim descriptions of god, identifying continuity with ancient Mediterranean theologies and innovations throughout late antiquity and into the middle ages. From the Renaissance and into the modern period, European developments in philosophy and science, which were thoroughly intertwined, led to changing conceptions of god and the role of the divine in the human world. Finally, in contemporary secular societies there are vast notions of gods and God, including views labeled: antitheism, atheism, agnosticism, pantheism, polytheism, theism, and monotheism. We will trace the history of these concepts, analyzing how the long-held conception of the cosmos as full of divine beings is related to more recent conceptions of a cosmos with only one god, or alternatively, no gods at all.

This is an online course, administered through Sakai. Our course has its own Sakai site that only we may access. The syllabus, online office hours, discussion forum, chat room, announcements, weekly lessons, quizzes, etc. are available through Sakai. You may contact me via email ([Debra.Ballentine@rutgers.edu](mailto:Debra.Ballentine@rutgers.edu)), and I will post course announcements through Sakai, which will also come to your university email address.

**Readings:** There is no textbook for this course. Weekly readings are available online (PDFs posted on Sakai). Each lesson will include primary texts, that is, excerpts from Mesopotamian, biblical, medieval, etc., authors as well as secondary, scholarly essays excerpted from textbooks and overviews of specific religions, historical periods, philosophical and scientific ideas, or influential thinkers.

**We will adhere to the University’s policy on Academic Integrity, available at**  
<http://academicintegrity.rutgers.edu/academic-integrity-policy>

## Requirements

Engagement Activities (class participation) = 20%

15% comprehension quizzes

05% review exercises

Forum discussion = 25%

Exams = 45%

15% midterm

15% midterm

15% final

Final project = 10%

## Course structure

Our course content is organized in 6 units, each unit has 2 lessons, we will spend a week on each lesson.

Each lesson contains:

- a. one video from the instructor
- b. assigned readings for the week
- c. a comprehension quiz, which you may take repeatedly; these count toward participation
- d. a discussion activity for each week, using the Sakai forums tool
  - i. during the first lesson in each unit, students will have a low-stakes discussion activity, based on an instructional prompt to identify central ideas: each student will contribute an initial post of 5 main ideas from the material; each student will read at least 3 classmates' posts and select the 3 most central ideas among them; each student will list the 3 central ideas as a "reply" to your own initial post
  - ii. during the second lesson in each unit, students will post in forums based on prompts that require students to tie each unit's lesson 2 to lesson 1, following the model: prompt, reply, respond, (and from me) a summation of your progress as a whole class; each student will post a reply to my prompt; then each student will read at least 3 classmates' posts; then each student will "reply" to your own initial post a response summarizing additional insights from your classmates' posts

In addition to weekly lessons, we have 2 midterm exams, 1 final exam, and a final project. Before each exam, you will have review exercises that count toward your participation grade. The final project is production of a timeline, which you will develop over the course of the semester; stages will include a draft that you submit to your peer-group, feedback from the group, a draft submitted to me, and a final draft.

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## **Tentative schedule of topics and readings**

### **Unit 1 - Introduction to approach and topic**

#### **Week 1**

##### **lesson 1a)** Introduction to the academic study of religion

What is religion? What is the place of religious studies in the humanities?

Explanation of “official” and “popular” attestations of religious ideas/practices

read: Russell McCutcheon, “What is the Academic Study of Religion?”; Bruce Lincoln, “Theses on Method,” *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* (1996): 225-227

#### **Week 2**

##### **lesson 1b)** Introduction to class topic

What are gods, God, divine beings, non-obvious beings, etc.? How do we find and study characterizations of gods and God in “western” religious traditions? Broad overview of timeline from the ancient Near East to modern Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. What is “monotheism”? How recently was this notion developed? In what context? Why is it problematic to retroject this modern notion of monotheism onto the ancient world and biblical traditions?

read: *Oxford English Dictionary* entries on “monotheism,” “polytheism,” “theism,” and “atheism”; ‘Overview’ and ‘Key Events’ portions of the West Asia and Europe timelines

<http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/>

### **Unit 2 - Ancient characterizations of gods**

#### **Week 3**

##### **lesson 2a)** Ancient Near Eastern gods

Birth, life, family relationships, and politics among the gods; state cult and royal propaganda; family religion and personal appeals to gods

read: pages 392-393, 396-401 of “Deities and Demons,” *Religions of the Ancient World, A Guide* (ed. Sarah Iles Johnston; Harvard, 2004); *Enuma Elish* #1, *Creation Myth from Ashur* #3, *Baal* #5, prayers #97-100, medical texts #112-115 from Michael Coogan, *A Reader of Ancient Near Eastern Texts* (Oxford, 2013)

#### **Week 4**

##### **lesson 2b)** Biblical characterizations of divine beings and God

various notions of God’s position: God among peers, God above peers, God’s wife and sons

read: John J. Collins, “Israel,” (p.181-188) and pages 402-403 from *Religions of the Ancient World, A Guide*; El Qom, Ketef Hinnom #135-136, Kuntillet Ajrud #152-155; from Michael Coogan, *A Reader of Ancient Near Eastern Texts*; Deut 32:8-9; Exod 20:3; Deut 4:20-32; Deut 6:4; Isa 40:21-29; Isa 43:10-11; Ps 29, 82; Job 1-2; Jer 44

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### **Unit 3 - Classical and late antique characterizations of gods**

#### **Week 5**

**lesson 3a)** Greek and Roman gods and cosmos

read: 408-413 from *Religions of the Ancient World, A Guide*; selections from Greek, Phoenician, and Roman theogonies from *Gods, Heroes, and Monsters, A Sourcebook of Greek, Roman, and Near Eastern Myths in Translation* (ed. Carolina Lopez-Ruiz; Oxford, 2014), 31-62; Valerie Warrior, *Roman Religion: A Sourcebook* (Focus, 2001), 1-13

#### **Week 6**

**lesson 3b)** Jewish, Christian, and Muslim ideas about the divine through late antiquity  
the creation of “orthodox” notions of God and divine beings

read: Shaye Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah* (Westminster, 2006), chapter 3; Harold Attridge, “Early Christianity,” (p.233-239) and 415-417 from *Religions of the Ancient World, A Guide*; Malise Ruthven, *Islam, A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2012), 27-47; Daniel Brown, *A New Introduction to Islam* (Blackwell, 2009), 172-178; *Classical Islam* (ed. Calder, Mojaddedi, Rippin; Routledge, 2012), 155-158; list of passages from Rabbinic texts, New Testament, and Qur’an

#### **WEEK 7**

**review and exam**

### **Unit 4 - Medieval characterizations of divine beings and God**

#### **Week 8**

**lesson 4a)** Aristotelian metaphysics

read: “Aristotelianism,” “Theology,” “Ontology,” and “Metaphysics” *Brill’s New Pauly* (Brill online, 2014); selections from Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*

#### **Week 9**

**Spring Break**

#### **Week 10**

**lesson 4b)** Theologians on cosmology and the nature of God; Augustine, Averroes, Anselm, Aquinas

read: “Topic II: Is there an infinitely perfect being?” from *Basic Issues in Medieval Philosophy* (ed. Richard N. Bosley and Martin M. Tweedale; Broadview, 2006); *Medieval Popular Religion 1000-1500, A Reader* (ed. John Shinnars; Broadview, 1999): 65, 109-111, 291, 336-337

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## **Unit 5 - Enlightenment**

### **Week 11**

**lesson 5a)** A disenchanted material world; Descartes and dualism; Newton and natural philosophy

read: Margaret Osler, “Rethinking the Universe: Newton on Gravity and God,” *Reconfiguring the World: Nature, God, and Human Understanding from the Middle Ages to Early Modern Europe* (Johns Hopkins 2010), 147-168; Tom Sorell, *Descartes, A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2000), 51-105

### **Week 12**

**lesson 5b)** Changing notions of the place and role of God; coining ‘monotheism’; notions of atheism, deism, theism, and monotheism

read: Thomas Dixon, *Science and Religion, A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2008), 37-57; *Oxford English Dictionary* entries on “monotheism,” “polytheism,” “theism,” and “atheism”

### **Week 13**

**review and exam**

## **Unit 6 - Modernity, postmodernity, and characterizations of god**

### **Week 14**

**lesson 6a)** Secularization, Scientific cosmology, and God/gods

read: selections from <http://www.ched.uq.edu.au/lectures-and-podcasts>

### **Week 15**

**lesson 6b)** Innumerable Bible-based models; official doctrines; popular portrayals

read: Jacob Neusner, ed. “Religion and Western Civilization in the 21st Century,” *Religions Foundations of Western Civilizations* (Abington, 2010), part 6, which includes excerpts from Jewish, Christian, and Muslim doctrinal statements

### **Reading period and Exam period**

**review and final exam**