

## The Question of God in Modern Culture

01:840:222 (Remote Synchronous)

MW 1:40-3:00 pm (section I) MW 3:20-4:40 pm (section II)

Spring 2021

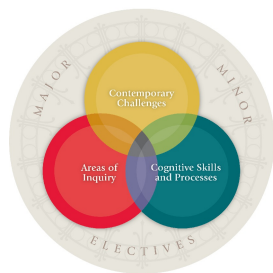
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This course takes an interdisciplinary approach to the question of God in modern culture, using the course title as the springboard for two parallel lines of inquiry: the “question of God” as discussed in philosophy and theology, and religion as it is manifested in “modern culture,” as understood through the lenses of sociology and literary/textual theory.

The first track addresses epistemological concerns, focusing on arguments for and against the claim that theism is rationally justifiable, and metaphysical questions about the nature of God and religious experience. We will discuss both classical arguments and more recent responses.

At the same time, the second track situates our study within the broad category of modern culture, especially as manifested in various forms of media, the marketplace, and politics. These institutions of culture are central locations for struggles over power and how religion is defined and practiced. We will consider how religions have changed, or are changing, in relation to consumerism, technology, economics, shifting demographics, cultural diversity, and globalization. Media representations influence popular beliefs and political ideas about both the cultural identity of God and the spiritual basis upon which national identities are imagined.

This course fulfills the following core curriculum learning goals of Rutgers University:



### **Philosophical and Theoretical Issues: Arts and Humanities**

\* Students will examine critically philosophical and other theoretical issues concerning the nature of reality, human experience, knowledge, value, and/or cultural production. **[AHo]**

### **Social and Historical Analysis**

\* Students will be able to explain the development of some aspect of a society or culture over time, including the history of ideas or history of science. **[HST]**

The course load (explained in more detail below) involves careful reading of texts, opportunities to participate both synchronously and asynchronously, weekly thought briefs on assigned readings, the writing of 4-5 short response papers, a movie review, a midterm exam, and gathering and synthesizing a portfolio of news media articles over the course of the semester. You will also be asked to think critically about your own assumptions about God and religion while respecting the plurality of opinions expressed in class.

Required Texts (some availability through Canvas – see details below)

*God*, by W. Jay Wood. McGill-Queens University Press. ISBN: 978-0-7735-3840-5 (readily available online through the Rutgers library).

*Quoting God: How Media Shape Ideas about Religion and Culture*, edited by Claire H. Badaracco. Baylor University Press. ISBN: 978-1-932792-06-5 (readily available online through the Rutgers library).

*Religion, Media, and the Marketplace*, edited by Lynn Schofield Clark. Rutgers University Press. ISBN: 978-0-8135-4018-4 (limited availability online through the Rutgers library).

*The End of White Christian America*, by Robert P. Jones. Simon and Schuster. ISBN: 978-1-5011-2232-3 (limited availability online through the Rutgers library).

Course Requirements:

1. *Participation* – involves several components/opportunities:

We will be holding synchronous online sessions of the course, so attending each session by logging in and being engaged during that time is important. If you have a hardship that prevents you from logging in live, each session will be recorded and you will be able to watch it that way. Some of the material covered in lectures and in-class discussion is not found in the textbooks, additional details may be given in class regarding particular assignments, and you will often be asked to contribute something particular to discussion boards at the end of the class; so if you are unable to attend a live session, it is vital that you watch it before the next session occurs.

In general, good participation requires completing the assignments before each class session, taking notes, and being actively engaged in any class discussion inasmuch as this is possible for you. How and what you learn from listening to a lecture, reading a textbook, doing research, etc., is exponentially enhanced when you have immediate access to other students' perspectives on the material. Thus, it is equally important and helpful that you share your perspective so that others may benefit from what you have to say. It also proves that you are thinking about the material. I encourage you to make vocal contributions when you can and also to add brief comments and/or questions to the public chat. While not ideal, the online format may actually be more comfortable for those who are shy about speaking in public. If called upon and you are not logged into a live session, you may follow up with an email contribution after you have watched the recording.

Participation also includes posting asynchronous responses to periodic discussion questions on Canvas. Specific instructions will be given within the class session as to what a discussion will involve. In most cases, you will need to respond to a particular question based on a short video, article, or something that was covered in the lecture or reading for the day. In some cases, you will also need to go back and respond to other students' posts. Each discussion will remain open for a limited time (usually one week), so be sure to make your contribution in a timely manner. Further instructions and grading rubrics will be given in class and in the Modules.

At other times, you will be asked to complete a short quiz online after the class session that will either ask for your responses to survey-style questions or help you to review the material covered in that class session. These will be graded automatically through Canvas Quizzes. As with the discussions, each quiz will remain open for a limited time (usually one week), so be sure to take it in a timely manner. Again, further instructions will be given in class.

Finally, participation also involves submitting a news media article on the dates noted on the syllabus (see below). The article should relate in some way to the convergence of religion and culture (both broadly defined) in today's world – and should not be an opinion piece. It must come from one of the following sources: Religion News Service, *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Washington Post*, BBC, NPR, *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, Politico; or one of the following wire services: Associated Press, Reuters, or Bloomberg. The easiest method of finding these kinds of articles is to use the Religion News Service (<https://religionnews.com/>) and/or subscribe to the RNS Morning Report (<https://religionnews.com/subscribe-to-rns-newsletters/>). Ideally, each article will be no more than two weeks old. You should submit a copy of the article, with a clear citation of the source and date, with highlights of the aspects you find most interesting and relevant to our course. (Articles must be submitted by the beginning of the class session to receive full credit.) You should then be prepared to discuss your article with the class (students will be randomly selected). Your articles need not relate to each other, but they may.

In general, you should think of participation being assessed according to the following standards:

- A: You have completed all assigned work before each class session and consistently play an active role in discussions. Your comments reflect excellent preparation and project a commitment to the learning goals of the course. Your contributions reflect a deep and serious engagement with the subject matter. In the discussion forums, you build upon the comments of others and pose insightful critical questions/comments that advance the level and depth of the conversation. You complete all of the quizzes successfully within the allotted time frame and you submit all news articles on time.
- B: You have completed your assigned work before most class sessions and often play an active role in discussion. Your comments reflect good preparation and a desire to learn. Your contributions are mostly on target and demonstrate interest. Your contributions in discussion forums are relevant and demonstrate that you are paying attention to the contributions of other students. You complete most of the participation components.
- C: Your preparation is inconsistent and you only occasionally engage in discussions. Your comments reflect adequate preparation when you do contribute. Your postings in discussion forums are inconsistent and you fail to complete some quizzes. You do not submit your news articles on time and/or highlighted/annotated.
- D: You are often unprepared and almost never contribute to discussions or complete the quizzes -and/or- you fail to complete most of the participation components.
- F: You never contribute or participate at all or your participation disrespects others.

2. *Response Papers* based on readings in the Clark text, due as indicated on the syllabus. These should be **one page maximum**, typed double-spaced in 12-point font (**or smaller**) with 1" margins (**or less**) all around. Do NOT waste space for a heading; you will be submitting the paper via Canvas once you have logged in, so you can simply begin your text on the first typed line. You should fill the page and use multiple paragraphs. These are succinct, analytical responses to the assigned readings for the day in light of what we have been discussing in class. In each paper, you should address the following questions (use of first-person voice is fine) in a thoughtful and constructive way:

- \* Briefly, what is the main theme or point the author is trying to convey?
- \* Do you find their discussion/argument convincing? Why or why not?
- \* What is something you learned or that surprised you from this reading?
- \* How is this material relevant for you and how does it challenge your own assumptions/ideas?

Remember the point of the assignment is to prove that you did the reading and thought about it. You must complete **five (5)** total from the six that are assigned, though you should read all of the chapters and be prepared for the in-class discussions. These are graded rather strictly according to the following scale and will be lowered one whole number for each class a paper is turned in late. If not completed within the possible allotted time, the grade will be zero. (Your four highest scores will be used to calculate your final grade for these papers.)

- 4 = A (Wow! Very insightful and nearly flawless! It **exceeds** expectations in substance)
- 3 = B (**The typical grade for completing the paper meeting minimum expectations**)
- 2 = C (Not complete or not clearly written or some mistakes or wrong formatting)
- 1 = D (Overly problematic, but at least you wrote something)

(Note: while late written assignments will be penalized as described above, you will be allowed one late paper (one class period) without a penalty. Just be aware that you will have benefitted from the class discussion and this will be taken into account in the assessment of your paper.)

3. *I-C-Q Briefs*, due as listed on the syllabus. Based on the assigned reading of the day, you will submit a thought brief highlighting one thing you found particularly Interesting, one thing that Challenged you to think about something in a new way, and one thing that raised a Question for you. These are designed to enable more active reading. They need to be submitted just before class begins and will be used as a basis for our discussion that day, as I will call upon a few students to share elements of their briefs with the class. You will be called upon to share several times over the course of the semester. If called upon on a day that you are not logged into the live session, you may email me your response after you watch the recording. More details and instructions will be given both in class and in the Modules, but they will be graded according to the following scale:

- 4 =  $\checkmark +$  (check-plus) (shows you did the whole reading and generated many interesting thoughts)
- 3 =  $\checkmark$  (check) (shows you did the whole reading and thought about it)
- 2 =  $\checkmark -$  (check-minus) (doesn't show you did the whole reading; only minimal thoughts; or late)
- 1 = (submitted after the relevant class session or something is missing or incorrect)

4. *Midterm Exam*, on Wednesday, March 24, mostly on material from the Wood text. This will require use of the Respondus Lockdown Browser, but not the webcam. Failure to take the test in the allotted time frame (more than our usual class time) without **prior** notification and arrangements will result in a **zero** grade.
  
5. *Movie Review*, due Wednesday, April 28, on a documentary viewable through Canvas. You will respond to specific question prompts to be posted in Canvas. The paper should be two-pages **minimum**, typed double-spaced in 12-point (no larger) Times New Roman font with 1" margins (or less) all around. Again, do NOT waste space for a heading; you may begin your text on the first typed line. Each paper is graded on the following 1-10 numbered scale and will drop a half-number for each day the paper is late.

10 = A (An extraordinary paper. Thorough. Effective critical thinking. Rare but possible)

9.5 = A- (An excellent paper – well above and beyond expectations)

9 = B+ (Insightfully completed paper as expected and written very well)

8.5 = B (**This is the typical grade for completing the paper as assigned**)

8 = B- (Not quite up to expectations)

7.5 = C+ (Falls short in length or critical thinking)

7 = C (Falls short as above and/or too much summary without analysis)

6.5 = C- (Falls short as above and/or poor writing skills)

6 = D+ (These grades and below are compounding the problems mentioned above)

5.5 = D

5 = D-

6. *News Media Portfolios*. (This will function as your final exam and will be due at the scheduled final exam time for your section of the course.) Based on the articles you have gathered throughout the semester, you will write a review essay of the trends and themes you observe across the spectrum of your articles. You will need to link each of the articles to specific issues and problems discussed by the scholars and journalists in the Badaracco text, and make connections to other course material as well. Overall, you should demonstrate how the articles expand your understanding of theories and issues covered throughout the semester, especially with regard to how God questions and religion are represented in the media through these articles. As with all written work in this course, it should be typed, double-spaced, with appropriate fonts and margins. Your review essay should be a minimum of 1200 words, but will likely need to be longer (1500+) in order to meet the requirements of the assignment. More detailed rubrics to come.

Course grades will be based on the following formula:

Participation	20%
Response Papers	20%
ICQ Briefs	10%
Midterm Exam	20%
Movie Review	10%
News Media Portfolio	20%

### General Criteria for Evaluation:

- accuracy and precision of scholarship
- clarity of oral and written expression
- progress in critical thinking skills
- completion of assignments and readings on due dates
- thoroughness, creativity, originality and contribution to field of inquiry

A Note about Grading: A's are supposed to be exceptional grades. In order to earn an A (Outstanding) in this course, you must complete all assignments **really well**. Your work should not only be nearly flawless, but also above and beyond expectations. Doing all assignments **well** fits more appropriately in the B(+) range of grades ((Very) Good). When work is flawed, late, or incomplete, it fits into the C (Satisfactory) and D (Poor) range.

NOTE: If you have any special needs or a disability that requires any special accommodation to fulfill any course requirements, you need to provide acceptable documentation to the Office of Disability Services. That office will then make arrangements as needed with Dr. McGinley.

Be sure to take advantage of the many academic support services Rutgers offers through a variety of Learning Centers. Go to <https://rlc.rutgers.edu/about-us> for more information.

Remember that if you EVER consult an outside source for something you are writing, you MUST acknowledge it through an appropriate citation. Portraying someone else's ideas or work as your own is **plagiarism** and any student found plagiarizing will receive an F for the entire course. (<http://academicintegrity.rutgers.edu/academic-integrity-policy/>)

### **Schedule of Topics, Readings and Assignments:**

Readings and papers are DUE on the date for which they are listed.

Jan 20	Course Introduction	
Jan 25	<i>Religion, Media, and the Marketplace:</i> Introduction: Clark, "Identity, Belonging, and Religious Lifestyle Branding (Fashion Bibles, Bhangra Parties, and Muslim Pop)," pp. 1-33	
Jan 27	Wood, Chapter 1: Design Arguments	ICQ Brief
Feb 1	<i>quoting God:</i> Chapter 2: Gaddy, "God Talk in the Public Square" and el-Nawawy, "Law and the Middle East Media: Between Censorship and Independence," pp. 43-66	News Article #1
Feb 3	Wood, Chapters 2-3: Cosmological Arguments and the Ontological Argument	ICQ Brief

Feb 8	<i>Religion, Media, and the Marketplace:</i> Chapter 6: Sheen, “Cartoon Wars: <i>The Prince of Egypt</i> in Retrospect,” pp. 154-168	Response Paper #1
Feb 10	Wood, Chapter 4: The Moral Argument for God’s Existence	ICQ Brief
Feb 15	<i>quoting God:</i> Chapter 4: Moore, “A Framework for Understanding Fundamentalism” and Flintoff, “Modernity and Fundamentalism in Mongolia,” pp. 87-106	News Article #2
Feb 17	Wood, Chapter 5: Religious Experience and Cumulative Case Arguments	ICQ Brief
Feb 22	<i>Religion, Media, and the Marketplace:</i> Chapter 4: Viswanathan, “Literacy in the Eye of the Conversion Storm,” pp. 105-122	Response Paper #2
Feb 24	Wood, Chapter 6: Religious Belief without Evidence	ICQ Brief
Mar 1	<i>quoting God:</i> Chapter 10: Schaefer, “Reporting Complexity: Science and Religion” and Williams, “Fairness and Pressure Advocacy in Controversial Science,” pp. 211-231	News Article #3
Mar 3	Wood, Chapter 7: The Problem of Suffering	ICQ Brief
Mar 8	<i>Religion, Media, and the Marketplace:</i> Chapter 5: Davis, “Mary as Media Icon: Gender and Militancy in 20 <sup>th</sup> Century U.S. Roman Catholic Devotional Media,” pp. 123-153	Response Paper #3
Mar 10	Wood, Chapter 8: The Nature of God	ICQ Brief
Mar 15, 17	Spring Break (No Class Sessions)	
Mar 22	<i>quoting God:</i> Chapter 9: Elizondo, “The Virgin of Guadalupe as Cultural Icon” and Rodriguez, “Desert Religions,” pp. 201-210	News Article #4
Mar 24	<b>Midterm Exam</b> (mostly on Wood text)	

Mar 29	<i>Religion, Media, and the Marketplace:</i> Chapter 7: Alsdurf, “Evangelicalism and the Presidential Election of 1960: The ‘Catholic Question’ in <i>Christianity Today</i> Magazine,” pp. 171-197	Response Paper #4
Mar 31	Jones, Chapter 1: Who Is White Christian America?	ICQ Brief
Apr 5	<i>quoting God:</i> Chapter 5: Boyer, “Biblical Prophecy and Foreign Policy” and Abdallah, “Post-9/11 Media and Muslim Identity in American Media,” pp. 107-128	News Article #5
Apr 7	Jones, Chapter 3: Politics: The End of the White Christian Strategy	ICQ Brief
Apr 12	<i>Religion, Media, and the Marketplace:</i> Chapter 8: Yilmaz, “Religion as Rhetorical Resource: The Muslim Immigrant in (Danish) Public Discourse,” pp. 198-223	Response Paper #5
Apr 14	Jones, Chapter 5: Race: Desegregating White Christian America	ICQ Brief
Apr 19	<i>quoting God:</i> Chapter 3: Moses, “The First Amendment and the Falun Gong” and Smith, “First Amendment and the Common Good,” pp. 67-85	News Article #6
Apr 21	Jones, Chapter 4: Family: Gay Marriage and White Christian America	ICQ Brief
Apr 26	<i>Religion, Media, and the Marketplace:</i> Chapter 10: Gilmore, “‘Media Mecca’: Tensions, Tropes, and Techno-Pagans at the Burning Man Festival,” pp. 247-279	Response Paper #6
Apr 28	Documentary Film: <i>Hail, Satan?</i> Directed by Penny Lane (Available through Canvas)	Movie Review
May 3	Course Conclusion Jones: Afterword (White Christian America and the Trump Presidency)	
May 11(I) May 12(II)	<b>“Take-Home” Final</b> (News Media Portfolio)	<b>News Media Portfolio</b>