

## CAS RN 100 – Introduction to Religion

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MWF 1-2 pm  
CAS 211  
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Description: Religion matters. After decades of thinking that religion and modernity were on a collision course (with religion destined to fade away as modernity advanced), most careful observers have come to realize that religion remains a powerful force even in modern societies such as the United States. Much of religion's enduring power derives from the many ways it permeates our lives. It affects us in private and in public, personally and collectively. It is something we feel, and something we do. And while others treasure it as heaven-sent, others believe it is evil incarnate. So it should not be surprising that scholars of religion disagree when it comes to defining "religion." This course explores various ways in which scholars and practitioners have explained "what religion is all about." It begins with theories ordinary observers (BU students included) carry around in their heads. Some of these are informed and deeply insightful. Others are caricatures. Our task is to sift through competing views and approaches and see what makes sense.

Objectives: Students will be expected to learn about how human beings have and continue to act religiously, and to question simple conceptions they may have regarding what religion really is and does. They will be exposed to a wide variety of theories (both theological and secular, pro and con) regarding religious beliefs and practices, and will learn to analyze and criticize those approaches. In the process, they will explore their own ideas and values about the world's religions, and the place of religion in our increasingly global world.

### Requirements:

- 1) Attendance and Class Participation (10%)
- 2) Two Religious Literacy Quizzes (10% each = 20% total)
- 3) Short Paper on Lewis and Freud (250 words), due **September 25 at the beginning of class** (5%)
- 4) Short Paper (3-4 pages, typed, double-spaced) (10%), due **November 20 at the beginning of class** (10%). The task is to analyze one of the religious practices or texts considered in this course. Place it in context in terms of (a) historical moment; (b) religious or philosophical tradition(s). Where does this form of religion come from? What were the social and intellectual circumstances surrounding its appearance or creation? Why was it written or developed? Where? For whom? How was/is it similar to or different from other works and practices surrounding and preceding it? If it is a contemporary practice, how has it been transformed by contemporary practitioners? Is it authentic in its contemporary manifestation, or is it a bastardization?
- 5) Final Project: Make Your Own Religion (25%). Group presentation of a new religion of your own imagining (15%); plus a short individual paper of your own (3-4 pages analyzing your group's project via such questions as . . . Which theory of religion does it capitalize on? What are its strengths? Weaknesses?) (10%). Group projects will be presented in class and can also have a Web presence. Here are some things you might want to consider in constructing your own religion. Ninian Smart's 7 "dimensions of religion": ritual; narrative/mythic; experiential/emotional; social/institutional; ethical/legal; doctrinal/philosophical; material. What holidays does your religion celebrate? How does it deal with birth? Death?

What are its key symbols? Beliefs? Practices? How if at all does it deal with the problem of evil? Does it have any interesting moral teachings? Sexual ethic? Does it have a story of creation or of the end of the world? What kinds of institutions does it support? Finally, what is YOUR religion really all about? After all these new religions have presented themselves to the class, we will "vote" on the winners and losers. The winning religion will earn A's for its students on the group presentation portion of this assignment. In-class presentations on **December 4-9**. Short paper due **December 11 at the beginning of class**.

6) Final Examination (30%). Date t.b.a. by the Registrar's Office.

#### Late Papers/Makeup Exams Policy

Exams will not be rescheduled. Papers are due at the beginning of class on the due date. Papers *may* be handed in late, but will be marked down one half a grade for each day or portion of a day they are late. Exceptions only for illness with doctor's note or death/sickness in the family.

#### Plagiarism

In keeping with Boston University's policies, plagiarism will be penalized severely. If you are uncertain as to what constitutes plagiarism, see the College of Arts and Sciences academic conduct code at: <http://www.bu.edu/cas/academic-conduct-codes-undergraduate-and-grs/>

#### REQUIRED READING

Covington, *Salvation on Sand Mountain* (Perseus)

Eck, Darsan: *Seeing the Divine Image in India* (Perseus)

Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* (Norton)

Herling, *Beginner's Guide to the Study of Religion* (Macmillan Higher Education)

James, *Varieties of Religious Experience* (Penguin USA)

Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Harper)

Prothero, *God is Not One* (HarperOne)

#### COURSE SCHEDULE

##### INTRODUCTION

Sept 4 Introduction: What is Religion *Really* About?

Sept 6 What Are We Doing When We Study Religion (I)?

**Reading:** Herling, Chapter 1, 1-21

Sept 9 What Are We Doing When We Study Religion (II)?

**Reading:** Herling, Chapter 2, 23-45

##### RELIGION IS REALLY ABOUT TRUTH (which is to say God, revelation, belief, faith)

Sep 11 Revelation in Mormonism and Islam

**Reading:** 1. Joseph Smith's first revelation (written 1828):

<http://www.xmission.com/~research/about/docum5.htm>

2. Joseph Smith's first vision (written in 1832):

<http://www.lds-mormon.com/fv.shtml> (read 1832 account of his first vision (first one) and Wentworth account (1838) of his first vision (third one)).

3. Al-Fatiha (The Opening Chapter of the Qur'an)

<http://www.sacred-texts.com/isl/pick/001.htm>

4. Sura 98 of the Qur'an (The Proof)

<http://www.sacred-texts.com/isl/pick/098.htm>

Sep 13 Faith and Belief in Evangelical Christianity

**Reading:** C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*

Sep 16 Faith and Belief in Evangelical Christianity

**Reading:** C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (cont.)

Sep 18 Faith and Belief

**Reading:** W. C. Smith, chapters from *Faith and Belief*, pp. 3-19, 105-127 (Blackboard)

RELIGION IS REALLY ABOUT IDIOCY  
(which is to say falsehood, illusion)

Sep 20 Sigmund Freud and Religion as Illusion

**Reading:** Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*

Sep 23 The "New Atheism"

**Reading:** Hitchens, "Religion Poisons Everything"

[http://www.slate.com/articles/news\\_and\\_politics/fighting\\_words/features/2007/god\\_is\\_not\\_great/religion\\_poisons\\_everything.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/fighting_words/features/2007/god_is_not_great/religion_poisons_everything.html)

Sep 25 Theism and Atheism in Dialogue

**Film:** "The Question of God: C.S. Lewis and Sigmund Freud" (to be viewed and discussed in class)

**Writing Assignment** (250 words, due at the beginning of class): When it comes to what religion is all about, who makes more sense: C.S. Lewis or Sigmund Freud? Be sure to refer in your paper to specific statements by both authors, and to compare and contrast their thought on the question of what religion is and what it does.

RELIGION IS REALLY ABOUT INDIVIDUAL EXPERIENCE  
(which is to say mysticism, feeling, ecstasy)

**Sep 27** Buddhist Meditation

**Reading:** Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, pp. 1-15; and Sumedho, *Mindfulness*, 13-40 (both in Blackboard)

**Sep 29** Pentecostalism

**Reading:** Grant Wacker, "Searching for Eden in a Satellite Dish" (Blackboard)

**Oct 2** William James and Mystical Experience

**Reading:** James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, lectures 16 and 17 (Mysticism)

**Oct 4** William James and Mystical Experience

**Reading:** James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, lectures 4-6 (Healthy Mindedness and the Sick Soul)

RELIGION IS REALLY ABOUT MORALITY

**Oct 7** Karen Armstrong's Charter for Compassion  
**Reading:** <http://charterforcompassion.org/>  
Viewing (in class): Karen Armstrong's Ted Talk

**Oct 9** Roman Catholicism on Birth Control and Sexuality  
Reading: *Humanae Vitae* (1968),  
<http://www.newadvent.org/library/docspa06hv.htm>

**Oct 11** Religious Literacy Discussion #1 (Hinduism and Buddhism)  
This is *not* a lecture today. It is a Q & A, and review session for Religious Literacy Quiz #1. Please read these two chapters ahead of time and come with questions about the Hindu and Buddhist traditions. I will do my best to answer them.  
**Reading:** Prothero, *God Is Not One* (chapters on Hinduism and Buddhism)

Oct 14 \*\* NO CLASSES (COLUMBUS DAY) (Our class meets Tuesday, Oct 15, instead) \*\*

**\*Oct 15** FIRST RELIGIOUS LITERACY QUIZ (Hinduism and Buddhism)

**\*Oct 16:** The Ten Commandments (the movie)  
**Film (in class):** "The Ten Commandments"

**Oct 18:** The Ten Commandments (discussion)  
**Reading:** 1. Ten Commandments (online)  
Exodus 20: 2-17: <http://www.mechon-mamre.org/p/pt/pt0220.htm>  
Deuteronomy 5: 6-21: <http://www.mechon-mamre.org/p/pt/pt0505.htm>  
2. Christopher Hitchens, "The New Commandments," *Vanity Fair* (April 2010),  
<http://www.vanityfair.com/culture/features/2010/04/hitchens-201004>

#### RELIGION IS REALLY ABOUT SEX

(which is to say regulating it, celebrating it, moralizing about it, oppressing women and/or oppressing sexual minorities)

\*Oct 21 Did Jesus Have a Body?  
**Film (in class):** "The Last Temptation of Christ"

Oct 23 The Kama Sutra and Hindu Desire  
**Reading:** Amy Braverman, "The Interpretation of Gods," *University of Chicago Magazine*,  
<http://magazine.uchicago.edu/0412/features/index.shtml>

Oct 25 Feminist Theology  
Reading: Mary Daly, *The Church and the Second Sex*, pp. 13-43 (Blackboard)

#### RELIGION IS REALLY ABOUT SOCIETY

(which is to say social solidarity, social glue, social order, and perhaps social change)

Oct 28 Religion as an Expression of Social Order  
**Reading:** Herling, *Beginner's Guide*, pp. 55-72

Oct 30 Is Patriotism a Religion?

Reading: Robert Bellah, "Civil Religion in America", pp. 1-21 (Blackboard)

Nov 1 Is Baseball a Religion?

Reading: David Chidester, "The Church of Baseball, the Fetish of Coca-Cola, and the Potlatch of Rock 'n' Roll." (Blackboard).

#### RELIGION IS REALLY ABOUT RITUAL

Nov 4 Li in Confucianism

Reading: Confucius, Analects, selections (Blackboard)

Nov 6 Hindu Devotionalism

**Reading:** Eck, *Darsan*

Nov 8 The Balinese Cockfight

**Reading:** Clifford Geertz, "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight,"

[http://uwch-4.humanities.washington.edu/~WG/~DCIII/120F%20Course%20Reader/CR5\\_Geertz\\_Deep%20Play.pdf](http://uwch-4.humanities.washington.edu/~WG/~DCIII/120F%20Course%20Reader/CR5_Geertz_Deep%20Play.pdf)

Nov 11 Are Kosher Rules about Hygiene?

**Reading:** Excerpt from Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, pp. 51-72 (Blackboard)

#### RELIGION IS REALLY ABOUT MONEY

(which is to say oppressing the poor, helping the poor, making money, or giving it away)

Nov 13 Marx, Latin American Liberation Theology, and the "Preferential Option for the Poor"

Reading: 1. Marx on Religion, selections (Blackboard);

2. *Rerum Novarum* (1891), <http://www.papalencyclicals.net/Leo13/113rerum.htm>;

3. Gustavo Gutierrez, "Liberation Praxis and Christian Faith", in Rosino Gibellini, ed. *Frontiers of Theology in Latin America*, pp. 1-32 (Blackboard)

Nov 15 The Social Gospel, the Gospel of Wealth, and the Prosperity Gospel

Reading: 1. Rauschenbusch, "The Social Aims of Jesus," in *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (1908), pp. 44-92 (Blackboard)

2. Andrew Carnegie, "The Gospel of Wealth,

<http://www.cis.vt.edu/modernworld/d/Carnegie.html>

3. Dave Van Biema and Jeff Chu, "Does God Want You To Be Rich," *Time* (September 10, 2006), <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1533448,00.html>

Nov 18 The Hajj to Mecca

**Reading:** Basharat Peer, "Modern Mecca," *New Yorker*, April 16, 2012 (Blackboard)

Nov 20 In-class work on final projects

**Assignment: Short Paper on a Religious Practice due at the beginning of class**

Nov 22 Religious Literacy Discussion #2 (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam)

This is *not* a lecture today. It is a Q & A, and review session for Religious Literacy Quiz #1. Please read these three chapters ahead of time and come with questions about the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions. I will do my best to answer them.

**Reading:** Prothero, *God Is Not One* (chapters on Judaism, Christianity, and Islam)

Nov 25 Religious Literacy Quiz #2 (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam)

\*\* THANKSGIVING BREAK: NOVEMBER 27 to DECEMBER 1

A CASE STUDY: WHAT IS *THIS* RELIGION REALLY ABOUT?

Dec 2 Snake Handling Religion

Reading: Covington, *Salvation on Sand Mountain*

MAKE YOUR OWN RELIGION

Dec 4 In-Class Presentations

Dec 6 In-Class Presentations

Dec 9 In-Class Presentations

Dec 11: Last Day of Class (The Vote)

**Assignment: Short Paper (on your “new religion”) due at the beginning of class**