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# Contemporary Religious Thought

**Instructor**

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**Institution**

Trinity University

## Course Description

This course explores the significance of religious symbols for human self-understanding and cultural values in a contemporary Western context (World War II to the present). We shall examine the thought of both proponents and critics of religion in relation to contemporary Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Native American Traditions. Some of the questions we shall ask include: (1) To what extent do religious symbols shape human culture and identity? (2) To what extent are humans responsible for both religious symbols and the cultures in which they emerge? (3) What roles do religious symbols play in shaping our views of race, class, gender, and nature? (4) What is the significance of religious diversity in contemporary culture?

Note: This course meets requirements for the following: Understanding the Role of Values, the International Studies major, the Women's Studies minor, and the American Intercultural Studies minor.

## Course Requirements

### A] Books

Carol L. Anyway, *Daughters of Another Path*

Cooley, *Family, Freedom & Faith: Building Community Today*

Cooley, Eakin, and McDaniel, *After Patriarchy*

Louise Erdrich, *Tracks*

Chaim Potok, *The Chosen*

Huston Smith, *The World's Religions*

Tucker and Grim, *Worldviews and Ecology*

### B] Reserve Readings (Please xerox and bring copies to class on assigned days.)

Malcolm X, "Mecca," from *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, chapter 17.

Richard Rubenstein, "Person and Myth in the Judaeo-Christian Encounter," from After Auschwitz.

Ozel Tendzin, Part I, from Buddha in the Palm of Your Hand, pp. 7-42.

### C] Reserve Films (IMS):

Tender Mercies

The Mission

## II. Additional Requirements

Oral Presentation (individual 10%; group 10%) 20%

Paper (5-7 typewritten pages: individual 10%; group 10%) 20%

Exams (30% each) 60%

Strong, thoughtful class participation may improve your overall grade when your semester average is borderline. Punctual class attendance is required; more than three absences will result in a grade of F for the semester. If you are taking this course PASS/FAIL, all assignments must be completed at the level of C or better in order to receive a PASS. There will be no extensions on due dates.

## III. Office Hours

Mondays and Wednesdays 3:00-4:00 p.m., Tuesdays, 2:30-3:30 p.m. and by appointment. The most effective way to see me is by scheduling an appointment. If I am not in when you call or come by, leave a message with a phone number, and I shall return your call.

## IV. Daily Assignments

You should come to class prepared to discuss each assignment. In order to prepare yourself for discussions, you should write out a question the assignment raised for you that you would like to discuss in class. Though we will never address every student's question on any given day, I shall from time to time call on you to raise your question, once we have analyzed the material in class. Some readings are more difficult than others; in which case, we shall spend more of class time on analysis and less on your questions. Formal discussion days are set aside for you to integrate each unit with relevant national and international contemporary events. On days marked in the syllabus for class discussion you should clip and bring a recent newspaper article that raises an issue related to contemporary religious life that you'd like to discuss. While this is not a graded exercise, active participation can positively affect your overall average.

## V. Specific Objectives:

- \* To encourage a general understanding of "religion" as it is manifested in various cultures.
- \* To gain a basic understanding of the history of several major religious systems.
- \* To realize the dangers of generalizing about any specific cultural/religious group.
- \* To show the importance of social/historical context in the formation of religious systems of ritual, doctrine and practice.

\* To demonstrate the powerful correlations between religion and politics, religion and economics, and religion and ethics.

At the end of the semester, I hope that you will have:

- been exposed to religions/cultures that previously were not familiar to you.
- gained a general knowledge of the central teachings and practices of the "major" world religions.
- gained a greater respect for "external" religious influences.
- obtained a better perspective on the relationship between religion and some of the contemporary issues of life.

A reminder: This course is not a:

- comprehensive history of religions course.
- comprehensive survey of the world's religions.

## **Other Important Matters**

I view my classes as "communities of learning." Dialogue, discussion, and questioning in class are encouraged. You also have insights, perspectives, experiences, and information that are important. Please do not hesitate to contribute to any discussion. And please realize that both your silence when you really want to speak and your dominance of a discussion when you have spoken too much will stifle our communal learning.

## **Schedule**

Date: Assignment for Next Class:

January 14 Introductions

January 16 Religion as Symbol System Smith, "Judaism," first half of The Chosen

January 19 Torah as God's Self-Revelation Finish The Chosen

January 21 What Does It Mean to Be Human? Rubenstein [R]; Modern Judaism vs. Jewish Tradition

January 23 After the Holocaust Plaskow in After Patriarchy

January 26 Judaism and Gender Katz in Worldviews & Ecology

January 28 Judaism and Nature Read the newspaper. (ranked preferences for group projects due) Find a clipping.

January 30 Class discussion Smith, "Christianity" (bring newspaper clippings with questions)

February 2 Jesus as God's Self-Revelation "Tender Mercies," & "The Mission" [R]

February 4 What Does It Mean to Be Human? Cooley, pp 1-68 The Humanity of Jesus

February 6 Challenges to the Meaning of "Human:" Cooley, pp 71-123 Created in the Image of God

February 9 Challenges to the Meaning of "Human:" McDaniel in Worldviews & Jesus and the Human Family Ecology

February 11 Christianity and Nature Read the newspaper. Find a clipping.

February 13 Class Discussion; (bring newspaper clippings with questions)

February 16 First Exam Smith, "Islam"; Anyway, Daughters of Another Path, chapters 1-5

February 18 The Quran as God's Self-Revelation Anyway, Daughters, ch. 6-10

February 20 What Does It Mean to Be Human? Malcolm X [R]; Modern Dilemmas for Christians and Muslims

February 23 Mecca as Sacred Space Hassan in After Patriarchy; The Brotherhood of All before Allah

February 25 Muslim Women and the Brotherhood of All Timm in Ecology & Worldviews

February 27 Islam and Nature Read the newspaper; Find a clipping.

March 2 Class Discussion Smith, "Buddhism" (Bring newspaper clippings with questions)

March 4 Neither God Nor No God Tendzin [R]

March 6 The Centrality of Meditation Gross in After Patriarchy (meditation in class or alternate assignment)

March 7-15 \*\*Spring Break\*\*

March 16 What does It Mean to Be Human? Brown in Worldviews & Buddhist Women and Community Ecology

March 18 Buddhism and Nature Read the newspaper; Find a clipping.

March 20 Class Discussion Smith, "Primal Traditions"; (bring newspaper clippings with questions); Two written copies of individual papers due; No late papers accepted

March 23 Pan-Poly-Mono-Theism Grimm in Worldviews & Ecology

March 25 Native Traditions and Nature Erdrich, Tracks

March 27 Native Traditions at Risk Read the newspaper. Find a clipping.

March 30 Class Discussion (bring newspaper clippings with questions)

April 1 Second exam

April 3 In-class preparation for group presentations

April 6 In-class preparation for group presentations

April 8 In-class preparation for group presentations

April 10 No class

April 13 Group presentation; Written Projects due at the beginning of class; No Late Projects Accepted

April 15 Group presentation

April 17 Group presentation

April 20 Group presentation

April 22 Group presentation

April 24 Group presentation

April 27 COURSE EVALUATIONS; Attendance Absolutely Required

## **Additional Information**

I encourage (and in some cases require) the following behavior:

- (1) Interrupt when necessary.
- (2) Experiment with the use of inclusive language. For example:
  - "humankind" instead of "mankind"
  - "people" or "human beings" instead of "man"
  - the use of both male and female pronouns instead of using only male pronouns(Note that while I do correct your language, I do not in any way grade you on inclusiveness.)
- (3) Voice your considered responses during class discussions.
- (4) Voice your disagreement (with respect for others, of course).
- (5) Risk expressing your ambivalence. (It may be totally appropriate to be unsure under the circumstances.)
- (6) Make an appointment to see me (through my secretary, if I'm not available).
- (7) If you need to get in touch with me and I'm unavailable, leave a message with my secretary.
- (8) Study in groups; argue with each other.
- (9) \* Know Trinity University's policy on academic integrity.
- (10) \* Come to Class Prepared

## **Grading**

I will use the following criteria to evaluate your papers and exams:

1. Focus on the question or issue: Does the essay address a stated question or issue? Is there a clearly stated, well argued thesis?

2. Evidence: Do the examples support the argument sufficiently?
3. Organization: Is the essay logically organized?
4. Scope: Does the essay deal with all the important aspects of the question or issue?
5. Originality: Are there new ideas or interesting interpretations of the evidence?
6. Quality of research: Does the essay reflect use of the best resources available? Are bibliographical sources properly and sufficiently documented?
7. Writing: How well is the paper or exam written? Do mechanical errors (spelling and poor grammar) detract from the quality of the ideas expressed? If the exam is an in-class exam, I do not grade writing.

These are my standards for grades:

A an extremely well-written paper or exam which not only covers all the major points but does so in an original and insightful way

B a solid and well-written paper or exam which demonstrates a good understanding of the material

C a paper or exam with many strengths but which lacks sufficient depth or focus; a paper flawed by poor organization and mechanical errors; a paper which fails to integrate the evidence into a larger interpretation or which fails to provide sufficient evidence to support the argument

D a paper or exam with major problems; see me for details

F a paper or exam which never was

For your oral presentations, I will be grading you on the content of your reports (what you say, how important it is and how conceptually clear it is). As well as the following:

1. Organization-- was your presentation clearly and logically organized?
2. Clarity-- could we hear you and could we understand what you were trying to say?
3. Eye contact-- did you make eye contact with everyone in the class and not just with the professor?
4. Enthusiasm-- did you convey the importance of your topic and your interest in it?

Grade Calculation:

A 4.0 B 3.0 C 2.0 D 1.0

A- 3.67 B- 2.67 C- 1.67 D- 0.67

B+ 3.33 C+ 2.33 D+ 1.33 F 0.0

I. Group Format for Oral Presentation and Final Essay

A] Oral

The format for group presentations may vary according to the topic and the group's creativity, but

must minimally include the following elements. Each group leader will give a brief introduction and lead a panel and class discussion for the group project. The introduction should include: (1) an introduction of herself or himself; (2) a statement of the topic with a brief overview; (3) an introduction of the group format, the subtopics, their relation to each other, and the individuals who will present them. The introduction should last no more than three minutes. Once the last presentation is complete, the leader should guide the general discussion by very briefly restating the individual questions and reframing them by relating them to each other, followed by leading the panelists and the class in response to them. Note: In place of the final exam for this class, students are required to work together on their group projects for a minimum of three hours outside the classroom.

#### B] Collected Essays:

Each group writes the introduction and conclusion for the "volume." The introduction should briefly set up the topic and relate without summarizing the essays that follow. The order of the essays is up to the group, but must be explained. The introduction should not exceed three typewritten pages. The conclusion should further relate the essays to each other and to the general topic (again without summarizing) in ways that clarify the general topic and address questions raised by the individual sub-topics. The conclusion should not exceed five typewritten pages. When relevant, both introduction and conclusion should incorporate class reading assignments, lectures, and discussions. Each group must turn in a summary of individual contributions to the group process for both the oral and the written project. This summary must be signed by each member of the group. This summary is due in the Department office by noon on the day before your group presentation is scheduled.

### II. Individual Format for Oral Presentation, and Final Essay:

#### A] Oral:

Regardless of the overall format, your presentation must include the following: State your specific topic question. Be sure to include what most excited you about your topic and what bothered you the most as you pursued your topic. Conclude by asking the class a new question this topic raised for you, and be prepared to help lead a discussion in response. Your presentation should last no more than 6 minutes.

#### B] Essay:

Each essay should consist of a clearly stated and well argued thesis in response to a central question or thesis, between 5 and 7 typewritten pages (double-spaced) in length. In addition, you should include endnotes and bibliography. As you work on your project, please draw upon the resources of the Writing center, the MLA style sheet, and Chris Nolan, the library liaison for Religion.

### III. General Topics: (Sub-topics will be handed out later)

1. Religion and State: First Amendment Religious Freedoms
2. Religious Pluralism in the United States: Minority Religious Traditions (Christian and Non-Christian)
3. Religion and Racism in the United States
4. Religion and the Militias

5. Religion and Popular Culture (Groups may choose to focus either on music or on film as a group topic)
6. International Religious Movements (Buddhist, Hari Krishna, Sufi, Bahai, Scientology)
7. The Role of Religion in Global Conflict (India, Ireland, Mexico, Tibet, and the former Yugoslavia)


## **Pedagogical Reflections**

I try to establish an environment conducive to free and open inquiry by students as individuals and in relation to one another. Given the nature of the academic study of religion, this requires a combination of lecture, Socratic interaction, general group discussion, and formal individual or group oral presentation by students, followed by class discussion in response. In addition, I try to work with students inside and outside the classroom on developing their skills in writing and in oral presentation.

My initial goal is to provide a role model; my ultimate goal for a given semester is to render myself obsolete. The general traits I hope to foster include a sense of intellectual wonder, a willingness to imagine different ways of being and doing, clarity of thought, willingness to be self-critical, intellectual risk-taking, and openness to and cooperation with others engaged in becoming educated. To accomplish these goals, I have developed a variety of approaches and techniques.

I see the classroom as a laboratory and the class as a grand experiment. I continually try out new ways (new to me, at least) of challenging students and motivating them to learn and to teach one another. For a while, for example, in this class, I paired students off as "study buddies" and required that they write reviews of one another's written work so that the writer might revise before turning in a final version to me. I graded both the papers and their partners' reviews. I also routinely required written reviews from all students of each student's oral presentation, this in addition to my own written review. My intention in both cases was to get students to take each other seriously as significant contributors to one another's education. Nevertheless, increased enrollments made this process unwieldy and difficult to grade. I therefore have recently tried something altogether different. I now divide each section (roughly thirty-five students) into groups of four or five students, each group focused on a specific topic in contemporary religious thought. Each student works on a related sub-topic, which I specify within the general topic, to prepare a written essay and to participate in a group oral presentation. The written essays form a collection, introduced with a conclusion, and edited, by the group or by a designated student within the group, depending on the size of the group. The group oral presentation concludes with a class discussion in response, led by the group. Students receive both individual and group grades for both oral and written work, with written comments. The semesters I have tried this approach have been perhaps the most rewarding in all my years of teaching this course. I think I have happened onto an extraordinary way for students at the end of a semester truly to take over a class and take charge of their own education. I never expected students to do the very high quality of work they have so far done, nor did I dream that lower-division students could learn so quickly to ask such sophisticated questions of one another. In all my experimenting, I hope my courses reflect a focus on developing student intellectual creativity and self-critique. I hope, most of all, they succeed in motivating students to make wisdom a lifetime pre-occupation.

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