

Integrating Seminar

Religious Studies 390
Spring, 2000
DePaul University

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Hours: By appointment (I'm usually on campus five days a week)

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HyperNews: <http://forums.depaul.edu/HyperNews/get/s00/rel-390-301.html>

Class meets Mondays from 1:30-4:45 in SAC 491.

A. OBJECTIVES:

This course proceeds from three assumptions. *First*, as a student majoring in religious studies, you ought, at or near the end of your undergraduate studies, to **reflect on the cumulative achievement of your work in this field of study**. What have you learned about the religious dimensions of life and culture? How has that learning occurred? Why is that learning significant? Do you think you have learned what you were "supposed to" in religious studies, by your standards or the department's?

Second, given the fact that DePaul University (and virtually every university) tells undergraduate students that relatively more specialized learning in the major is best pursued within the broader context of relatively more general learning (much of which takes place in what we call the Liberal Studies Program at DePaul), you should also now **take stock of your learning in liberal studies**. What significant insights have you gained through your liberal studies coursework in the arts and literature, philosophy, scientific inquiry, history, behavioral and social sciences, multiculturalism in the United States and experiential learning? How have these studies enhanced your overall educational experience? Do you think you have learned what you were "supposed to" in liberal studies, by your standards or the university's?

Third, you ought to **explore the connections between these specialized and general learning experiences**, reflecting on how liberal studies has related to your learning in the major—perhaps complementing it, extending it, or by contrasting with work in religious studies, helping to bring it into sharper focus. (I am well aware that all students take electives, and that some students do a second major or a minor in addition to their religious studies and liberal studies work. For the purposes of this course, however, please consider all your non-religious studies coursework to be part of what we are calling the "liberal studies" component of your university education.)

This course is an opportunity for you to engage in these three related sets of reflections, independently and in conversation with readings and with others in the class, and to write and speak about your reflections. On the one hand, this is another course in your progress toward the BA, another four credit hours toward a successful degree audit as you apply for graduation. Yet this is not just another course. This is a course about all the other courses. This is a meta-course; it's reflexivity 101. You have worked hard to learn the lessons in your individual courses through the years, but what lessons have you learned about the courses as a whole, about your own overall and ongoing project of study and learning? In your experience, what has all this been about? What does the department and university say you were supposed to have learned? What have you actually learned? How have you learned it? Why did you come to the university? What did you want? What did you get? What did you give? What would you change? What happens next? *In the context of becoming an educated person, what is religion, how do you know, and why do you care?*

At the end of this course you will **complete and present to the class a paper** which will be the culmination (at least for now) of your reflections on these matters. Working toward the paper, throughout the quarter you will be asked to **research your own education** in religious studies and liberal studies, to revisit and recover significant things you have learned through texts you have read, papers you have written, projects you have developed, etc. You may have to track down old files, professors and students. You will be involved in a serious research project, and the topic is your own learning over these past years. You will be asked to write and talk about this in significant detail in **class discussions** and on **HyperNews**.

In addition to revisiting your own education as a means of coming to write your paper, throughout the quarter we will be **reading a variety of new materials** that will, I hope, serve as stimulating catalysts for conversation and reflection on this project. Students will choose some of the readings, and I have selected others. Students in our class will provide readings for the class to consider and discuss, drawn from texts they have read in previous liberal studies course—readings that will help us focus on significant insights from that coursework, and help us make connections between liberal studies and the major. I have already assembled a course reader with some provocative articles, mostly pertaining to a few important debates, dynamics and controversies animating the field of religious studies today. Here (in a combination of quotation and paraphrase from articles in the reader) are some of the questions we will consider:

Does religion motivate most killing and most healing? Is religion nearly impossible to define and thus tantalizing? Are religions filled with incommensurable and incredible—even bizarre—beliefs and practices that collectively represent a vast series of rescue operations attempting to save or console humanity from its dread of death and finitude? Do religions express facets of common human experiences of a genuine ultimate reality, so that any person can interpret classic religious expressions as part of a process of ultimate transformation of self and society? Does the academic study of religion tend to accept the latest intellectual fads uncritically? Is it elitist, narrow, hierarchical and utterly out of touch with and indeed contemptuous of the actual beliefs and practices of most religious persons? Is "religion" an academically constructed rubric that cannot be thought of in essentialist terms like "the sacred," "ultimate concern" or "God," so that there are in fact no uniquely religious data? Is it reducible to a psychological mechanism or societal function, or is it sui generis? Is most comparative study vague, romanticized and blind to negative aspects of religion such as poverty, suffering, oppression and violence? Is the academic study of religion an intrinsically Western enterprise, and precisely because of this, suitable for studying some "religions" or dimensions of religion but woefully inadequate for others? Are the scholar's personal racial, gender or cultural characteristics relevant criteria by which to determine research or pedagogical competence? Is the secular methodology of religious studies deeply problematic in that it arose historically as part of the emergence of a consumer-capitalist ethos, such that religions are reproduced in open markets as objects for the Western gaze, to be consumed, appropriated or rejected? Is the desire for objectivity and neutrality necessary to avoid biased readings, or should it be rejected because it masks forms of ethnocentrism that can be discerned properly only when the location of the one doing the studying is taken into consideration? Should we favor instead a genuine theological engagement where the other is critically engaged in regard to questions of truth and transformation? Can one view the study of religion as occurring at a variety of levels with each level having its own kind of criteria, ranging from serving a particular religious tradition to phenomenologically observing religion to modeling or explaining religion, so that taken together these may be not mutually exclusive but mutually supportive within a single conceptualization of the religious studies enterprise as a "science of religion?" Can you really "get inside the head" of another's religious experience, belief or practice? Is comparative study actually possible or is the other always already distorted when seen through my own lens and thereby converted into the same as I am? When many maintain that comparative study is epistemologically and methodologically impossible, are students incorporated into a relentless trend towards the microcosmic and an ever narrower embroidering of minutiae, so that larger questions go unanswered, wisdom is dismissed as a lost fallacy and knowledge becomes a commodity to be possessed and manipulated? How can you study religious practices and ideas that you personally disagree with or even despise? In the academy, is hatred of religion a more respectable scholarly emotion than love, particularly hatred for one's

own religion? Do scholars, in an attempt to undo centuries of Western imperialism, become in their anti-colonialist approaches, cryptotheologians and uncritical advocates for those non-Western traditions and cultures they study? Is the call for objectivity in the religious studies classroom a façade for bad teaching wherein students feel anonymous, abandoned and alone as they attempt to build for themselves an intellectual and existential basis for future thinking and living? Is a process of evaluation inevitable despite attempts to bracket truth claims that religions make about ultimate reality? When Westerners increasingly study Eastern religions, does the East appeal to the West as an arena of superficial and selective self-discovery leading to cultural and religious ransacking, another form of imperialism and conquest to serve a shallow consumerist society? Is it possible to steer a middle course between the false universalism of modernism and the nihilism of postmodernism in which all cultural relations are reduced to the play of power and domination, by adopting a new comparativism driven by attention to historical change and cultural difference? Do you love your work? Is teaching and learning an act of heart as well as head? Have mentors evoked you and subjects chosen you? Do you do what you think you ought to do according to some abstract moral calculus, or do you pursue what you are gifted and called to do? What is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet? Are you optimistic or pessimistic about your future? Which do you emphasize more— "doing well" for yourself individually or "doing good" for a wider community? Do you agree with the following statement: "Life is short. This leadership stuff is bullshit. We could not make a difference even if we wanted to." Has your university education prepared you for the life you will lead and the world in which you will live? Without a vision in continuity with its founders, do major Catholic universities risk further reducing pluralism in American higher education by becoming like so many of their academic partners: high-class trade schools? Do university structures themselves tend to push aside any integrating vision; especially one based on faith, meaning or values? Does theology, when it becomes religious studies, transform itself from philosophy, which integrates thought, speech and life by grounding all of these architectonically in the sources or natures of things, into poetry, which while personally beneficial, cannot integrate a course of study and cannot have any particular claim to inclusion in a Catholic university's core curriculum?

And so, in the context of becoming an educated person, what is religion, how do you know, and why do you care?

B. REQUIREMENTS:

1. **Assignment preparation.** Please come to each class session having done the assigned readings, taken careful notes, and having tried your best to find out the meanings of terms and concepts in the readings that are unfamiliar to you. I have designed this course with the expectation and requirement that you will spend at least **six hours per week outside of class** preparing readings, researching your own past coursework, participating in HyperNews, and working on your paper. As you well know, being in college is hard work, but hopefully it is work you still enjoy doing, and take pride in doing well. You owe it to yourself, to others in the class, and to the integrity of the learning process to approach your academic work with sufficient seriousness. Finish strong!
2. **HyperNews participation.** For each session from April 3 through May 22, two or more students will be responsible for **posting Position Papers** on the HyperNews site for this class, which is located on the web at <http://forums.depaul.edu/HyperNews/get/s00/rel-390-301.html>. A Position Paper should respond to significant aspects of the reading, partly in light of the student's own work in religious studies and general education. Position Papers are NOT summaries of the reading but critical and constructive responses to significant aspects of the reading from the student's own informed perspective. They are intended to evoke rigorous and meaningful discussion in class. Position Papers must be posted **no later than 2:00 PM on the Friday before the Monday class session** in which the readings will be discussed, and they should be at least **750 words** in length. Others in the class are strongly encouraged to **post responses** to the Position Papers on the HyperNews site, either before or after class. All students are responsible for **reading the Position Papers before class**,

printing copies and bringing the copies to class.

3. **Class discussions.** Asking questions, raising concerns and offering your own ideas during class discussions is a crucial component of the learning process. This is where it gets the most interesting, where discovering insights becomes part of the fun of learning. You will be expected to be an active, informed, stimulating **participant in class discussions.**
4. **Providing readings.** Over the last three class sessions before finals week, each student will be responsible for selecting and distributing one reading drawn from his/her coursework in a specific component of liberal studies (arts and literature, philosophy, scientific inquiry, history, behavioral and social sciences, multiculturalism in the United States or experiential learning). The reading should represent some significant insight the student has gained from the selected area of liberal studies. This should be an insight the student believes has enhanced her/his learning in general and also one that relates to learning in the major—perhaps complementing it, extending it, or by contrasting with religious studies work, helping to bring it into sharper focus. The student who selected the reading is also responsible for posting a Position Paper about that reading on the HyperNews site in preparation for the class in which the reading is to be discussed. The Position Paper should explain the insight gained from the reading and its relation to religious studies. Each student is responsible for the photocopying expense and ***for distributing the reading in class the week before it is to be discussed.*** Readings should be a ***minimum of 10 and a maximum of 20 photocopied pages.***
5. **Paper.** Everything we do in this class will lead toward writing a paper exploring your learning in religious studies, in liberal studies and the connections between them as you take up this question: **In the context of becoming an educated person, what is religion, how do I know, and why do I care?** The paper should be approximately 15 pages in length, double-spaced. As stated earlier, you will write it by drawing upon selected aspects of your own previous coursework in religious studies and liberal studies, as well as selected aspects of the readings, discussions and HyperNews postings from this class. The paper should develop a focused, accurate, clear, relatively thorough discussion, and it should clarify the rationale for your own position with a significant degree of fullness and sophistication, making a solid, plausible and potentially convincing case. During finals week, each student will have 20 minutes to present her/his paper to the rest of the class. Presentations will take place over two sessions during finals week—one on **Monday, June 5 from 11:45-2:00** and the other on **Thursday, June 8 from 11:45-2:00.** All students are expected to attend both sessions in their entirety.
6. **Grading.** 50% of your final grade will be based on your paper. 50% will be based on your overall preparedness and participation in the class, including assignment preparation, HyperNews participation, class discussion and reading selection.

C. TEXT:

A Course Reader must be purchased from the Department of Religious Studies. The cost is \$12.00. Other readings will be distributed by students later in the quarter.

D. ACADEMIC INTEGRITY:

Please read the Academic Integrity Policy in the current *Student Handbook*. It describes violations of academic integrity, including plagiarism, noting that students who commit such violations are subject to sanctions such as (but not limited to) lowering a grade or failing the course. The policy states that students "must abstain from any violations of academic integrity and set examples for each other by assuming full responsibility for their academic and personal development..."

E. SCHEDULE:

March 27: Introduction, Syllabus, and initial inventories of learning in religious studies and liberal studies.

At this session each student will be provided with a listing of her/his previous college coursework and will be asked to begin thinking, writing and talking: In the context of becoming an educated person, what is religion, how do I know, and why do I care? Class meets in SAC 240 (enter through SAC 235 Computer Lab). All other class sessions meet in SAC 491.

April 3: Reader pages 1-57. Martin E. Marty, "You Get to Teach and Study Religion"; Raymond Firth, "Paradox in Religious Systems" and "The Truth of Religion?" in *Religion: A Humanist Interpretation*; David Tracy, "Resistance and Hope: The Question of Religion" in *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope*.

April 10: Reader pages 58-79. Paul V. Mankoski, "Academic Religion: Playground of the Vandals"; Sam Gill, "The Academic Study of Religion"; Gavin D'Costa, "The Tyranny of the Secular Imagination," in *Through a Glass Darkly: Essays in the Religious Imagination*.

April 17: Reader pages 80-110. J. S. Cumpsty, "The Academic Study of Religion"; Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, "Other Scholars' Myths" in *Other People's Myths: The Cave of Echoes*; Kimberly C. Patton, "Stumbling Along between the Immensities': Reflections on Teaching in the Study of Religion."

April 24: Reader pages 111-127. Tessa Bartholomeusz, "Spiritual Wealth and Neo-Orientalism"; David Gordon White, "The Scholar as Mythographer: Comparative Indo-European Myth and Postmodern Concerns," in *A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in the Postmodern Age*; Malcolm David Eckel, "Contested Identities: The Study of Buddhism in the Postmodern World," in *A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in the Postmodern Age*.

May 1: Reader pages 128-163, 176-183. Parker J. Palmer, "Teaching from Within" and "The Heart of a Teacher: Identity and Integrity in Teaching" in *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life*; Arthur Levine and Jeanette S. Cureton, "The Future: Doing Well or Doing Good" and "Conclusion" in *When Hope and Fear Collide: A Portrait of Today's College Student*; Francis Cardinal George, "The Catholic Mission in Higher Education."

May 8: Reader pages 165-175. "Liberal Studies Program, Goals of Selected Components"; Memo from Michael L. Mezey on "Capstone Course." Selected readings on liberal studies provided by students, drawn from coursework in arts, literature and philosophy.

May 15: Selected readings on liberal studies provided by students, drawn from coursework in scientific inquiry and history.

May 22: Selected readings on liberal studies provided by students, drawn from coursework in behavioral and social sciences, multiculturalism in the United States and experiential learning.

May 29: No class—Memorial Day.

June 5, 11:45-2:00: Paper Presentations.

June 8 (Thursday), 11:45-2:00: Paper Presentations.