

# RELI 10: What is Religion?

Spring 2011  
MW 4:30 - 5:55  
Heger Hall 101

Dr. Ann Burlein  
104K Heger Hall  
office hours  
MW 1:30-2:30  
or by appointment  
Ann.Burlein@Hofstra.edu  
516-463-7238

## Course Schedule

<u>Course Description</u>	<u>Books and Readings</u>
<u>Grading &amp; Plagiarism</u>	<u>Late Work Policy</u>
<u>Absence Karma</u>	<u>Assignments</u>



The Psalter map\* accompanied a 13th century book of Psalms. Legend says that medieval mapmakers wrote "here be dragons" at the edge of their known world. Here they drew dragons at the base of the map, below the world.

## Course Goals

J.Z. Smith used to say that the only place one could find religion was in the scholar's study. By this he meant that no one ever does 'religion' in the sense that the course title uses the term. If you do religion, you do a particular one (and even then, you do not practice all forms of Judaism at once, but Conservative or Reform or whatever). The wager of religious studies is that you learn something worthwhile if you stand back and study, not just particular religions, but 'religion' in general. That said (and despite the class title), scholars long ago gave up trying to come up with a definition of religion that fit all forms of religiosity across all time and space: religions have been, are, and will be just too diverse!

The purpose of this class is to introduce you to the study of 'religion' by looking briefly at Judaism, Christianity and Islam. By the end of this class you will be able to describe some basic aspects of their historical contexts, as well as be able to relate that history to key texts and practices/rituals. (This is [departmental learning goal #1: knowledge](#)).

But religious studies is about more than description. As part of investigating why it

might be worthwhile to think about 'religion,' by the end of the class you will be able to analyze:

- **ritual communication:** how do embodied practices communicate religious beliefs and feelings, perceptions and ideas? This is the 'logic' (which can be contradictory, just like life) by which a worldview is formed and transmitted, resisted and changed. (This is also [departmental learning goal #1: knowledge](#)).
- **episteme:** The notion of episteme argues that beneath different worldviews there might be shared rules by which worldviews are formed. The idea is that these shared rules influence the space in which different thoughts unfold. Foucault called the shared rules by which different logics or worldviews get formed an 'episteme.' It is because different worldviews can share a common episteme that enables us to agree or disagree. It is because we share an episteme that we can recognize different points of view as true or false. When you come up against an episteme that is not yours, your response is NOT 'That's wrong!' but 'the stark impossibility of thinking *that!*' (as Foucault describes it). The primary episteme that we will ponder in this class is the difference between the ancient and the modern. (This is [departmental learning goal #3 -- analysis](#); but also [goal # 5: evaluation](#)).

But studying religion is about more than analysis and evaluation. The point of standing in the scholar's place and thinking about religion in general (which no one lives) is to ask questions that you could not ask if you stand within the situated perspective of an actual life (either inside a religion as a believer or beside that religion as someone who studies it and only it). The wager of religious studies is that thinking through difference enables you to ask larger questions. The primary way we as a class will learn to do this is through our overall theme of Religion and its Monsters. What is religion, really? Who knows ... really? What kind of thing can you learn if you try to understand different worldviews and maybe even different epistememes? Asking these questions propels you (and me) into the dimension of un-knowing, of opening a space of freedom beyond the known answers: what if religion was *that*? This not-knowing is part of what it means to think comparatively and thus, to theorize religion in general: to open up a space where you think analogously, migrating back and forth between different concrete situations. The wager of religious studies is that thinking through difference is productive. This is [departmental learning goal #2](#).

Many of you are taking this course as part of your distribution requirements in General Education. This course fulfills Goal #1 (critical thinking), Goal #2 (analytical reasoning), Goal #3 (written communication), Goal #4 (oral communication) and Goal #5 (global issues). For a list of these goals, click [here](#).

## **Books and Readings --**

Required materials to be purchased:

- Timothy Beal, *Religion and its Monsters* (New York: Routledge, 2002).
- Plato, *Phaedo* -- **Do not purchase this one!**
- Additional articles and occasional handouts

**You MUST bring a copy of whatever material is assigned for the day to class!**

## **Grading Policies**

Studying religion is both an academic and a personal exercise. In your written assignments you will be graded on thinking and argumentation. I will not grade your personal beliefs or non-belief. Nor will I grade or the particular position you take. I will grade how well you **articulate why** you (or someone) thinks this way as well as your ability to **reflect critically** on the position you take.

**Academic Dishonesty:** This course is dedicated to helping you develop your own thinking about what religion is. Thus I regard plagiarism as a serious violation of the academic compact, because it involves passing off someone else's thought as your own. This can happen by copying someone else's words or re-phrasing someone else's ideas in your words. Neither is your own thought: If through conversation with you I determine that you have committed an academic violation, you will receive a zero for the assignment and I will file a report to the Provost and Dean (as per University policy). I regard cheating on a test similarly: you are encouraged to work and study with others before the test, but when you are in a test you are on your own, without notes or cell.

Plagiarism is a serious ethical and professional infraction. Hofstra's policy on academic honesty reads: "The academic community assumes that work of any kind [...] is done, entirely, and without assistance, by and only for the individual(s) whose name(s) it bears." Please refer to the "[Procedure for Handling Violations of Academic Honesty by Undergraduate Students at Hofstra University](#)" for details about what constitutes plagiarism, and Hofstra's procedures for handling violations.

**Disabilities Policy:** If you believe you need accommodations for a disability, please contact Services for Students with Disabilities(SSD). In accordance with Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, qualified individuals with disabilities will not be discriminated against in any programs, or services available at Hofstra University. Individuals with disabilities are entitled to accommodations designed to facilitate full access to all programs and services. SSD is responsible for coordinating disability-related accommodations and will provide students with documented disabilities accommodation letters, as appropriate. Since accommodations may require early planning and are not retroactive, please contact SSD as soon as possible. All students are responsible for providing accommodation letters to each instructor and for discussing with him or her the specific accommodations needed and how they can be best implemented in each course.

For more information on services provided by the university and for submission of documentation, please contact the Services for Students with Disabilities, 212 Memorial Hall, 516-463-7075.

### **Grading Scale**

**0** -- You turned in an assignment that was not your own. Don't let this be you!

**F** -- You can earn an F in two ways. Your writing was fantastic, but late. OR your writing fails to answer the questions, expresses little accurate information, and/ or is not coherent.

**D** -- shows effort, but the information and explanation are weak. You need to make more references to the readings.

**C** -- articulates **what** you think clearly. You need to engage in a more detailed and systematic way with the readings.

**B** -- explores **why** you think the way you do.

**A** -- reserved for excellence, when you use the material as a springboard for higher level thinking. You engage with other perspectives and counter-arguments. You elaborate a creative and original take on the readings and issues being discussed in class, and you articulate your thoughts in your own voice. You go beyond stating your point of view to evaluate the pros and cons of thinking the way you do.

[How I convert letter grades into numbers](#)

## Late Work Policy

In order to return your work to you promptly with detailed and constructive feedback, I do not accept late work. You will earn an F, and will forfeit your right to my feedback. If there is an emergency or a tragedy in your life and you need an exception, you must communicate with me **BEFORE the due-date**. This includes tests: if you are too sick to attend class on a day when we are scheduled to take a test, you must call and let me know **BEFORE class begins** that you will not be able to take the test and arrange time for a make-up.

## Assignments

- **There is no one textbook that holds this class together. As a result, attendance in class and in your discussion sections is crucial. To reflect this, 20% of your grade will come from your participation. You are expected to 1) attend ALL classes, 2) have read and prepared ALL assignments before coming to class and 3) DISCUSS relevant issues, in class and especially in your section.** If you are someone who rarely speaks, then this will be an opportunity for you to work with me to find ways to help you feel more comfortable speaking in class. If you are someone who often speaks in class, then this will be an opportunity for you to learn how to monitor your speaking by limiting your contributions so that others have a chance to jump in.

**Because there is no one textbook that holds this class together, absences in this class work like karma. You have two days to be absent without consequences. On your third day of absence, you lose all benefit of the doubt when it comes to your final grade. For every absence thereafter, you lose 1/3 of a letter grade from your final grade. (This means you have two cuts. You do not. If you cut class twice in the beginning of the semester, and then become sick at the end, karma will take effect).**

When you are absent, **YOU** are responsible to find out from another student what went on in class and for making up the work that you missed. **MAKE FRIENDS. If you are absent on a day when we are scheduled to take a**

test, see the above [policy on late work](#).

- 40% of your grade will come from 3 tests, designed to test both a) your mastery of content and b) your mastery of interpretive and analytical skills through short answer questions and/or essays. You will have the option of re-writing these short answers to practice your writing and revision skills. Your final test will be on our assigned exam day Tues May 11 1:30-3:30.
- 40% of your grade will come from a [semester project](#)  
**Part One is due April 8. Part Two is due on our scheduled exam day.**

## Course Schedule

W Jan 26

### Introduction:

- J.Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion*, xi. Handout
- Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morality*, 92. Handout.

M Jan 31

### Theoretical frameworks

William Connolly, *Pluralism*, 11-37.

W Feb 2

### More theoretical frameworks

- 1) Beal, Introduction, 1-10.
- 2) Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* and *Birth of the Clinic*.

## I. Using Religion to Create Order out of Chaos: Creation Narratives

M Feb 7

### Traditions and Multiplicity: The Ancient Near Eastern Context

- 1) View contemporary map of [Middle East](#)
- 2) View a contemporary map of [Muslim Distribution across the globe](#)
- 3) Look at the map of Ancient Near East in your Bible handout.

W Feb 9 and M Feb 14

### Chaos Gods

- 1) Beal, chp one, 13-22. [Reading Guide](#).
- 2) Beal, chp two, 23-33. [Reading Guide](#)
- 3) Enuma Elish

4) Genesis One (The reading I gave you includes more chapters: they are for later!).

5) Exodus 15

W Feb 16

### **Theoretical Interlude**

Geertz, Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight

M Feb 21

Enjoy your holiday!

W Feb 23

Finish Geertz and review for test

M Feb 28

### **Test # 1**

## **II. Using Practices to Create Order from Chaos: Creation Myths as Ritual**

W Mar 2

**Judaism:** Prayer, Shabbat, Talmud, Contemporary Denominations

1) Mary Pat Fisher, *Living Religions*, "Torah," "Sacred Practices," "Holy Days," and "Contemporary Judaism," in *Living Religions*, 90-106.

2) Robert Goldenberg, "A Talmudic Glossary," from *Back to the Sources*, ed. Barry Holtz, 132-top of 144.

The video that we saw in class was *The Long Search: Judaism*. Hofstra has this video on streaming video.

[The Judaism video](#)

[The general Long Search link, in which you must find Judaism](#)

M Mar 7

### **Judaism: Death and Dying**

Samuel Heilman, *When a Jew Dies*, 80-83, 92-100, 119-128, 134-135, 153-60, 162-181.

[Listen to the Kaddish.](#)

W Mar 9

### **Writing assignment using Geertz to analyze Jewish ritual:**

What is the story that Jews tell themselves about themselves in Talmud? Sabbath? Death rituals?

M Mar 14

### **Islam**

1) Cleary, *The Essential Koran*, 1-18, 34-35 and 41-43.

2) Click to see the first chapter of the Quran, which is called the [Fatihah](#). If you are at a computer with speakers, you can hear it in Arabic.

3) View calligraphy by clicking [here](#) and [here](#).

W Mar 16

## Islam: Five Pillars

Sachiko Murata and William Chittick, "The Five Pillars," from *The Vision of Islam*.

M Mar 21

Hajj, Nation of Islam

**You will turn in ONE of the following:**

**A) Writing assignment using Geertz to analyze Islam:**

What is the story Muslims tell themselves about themselves reading the Quran? Praying? Making the hajj?

**B) If you feel confident using Geertz to analyze religious ritual, try your hand at:**

**Writing assignment: comparison AND contrast -- Judaism and Islam.**

The point of comparing AND contrasting different religions is to get yourself to think something NEW. Your FINAL goal is to make yourself stand back from both religions and stand in the conceptual space of 'religion in general' -- so that you can see something about religion that you could not see when you focused on one religion alone. So the key is: what theme do you want to explore?

a) Pick a theme that both Judaism and Islam share:

prayer, two-way relationship with God; sacred Scripture; monotheism ... but you can think of more creative ones!!

b) Tell me how these 2 religions are similar vis-a-vis that theme. Do NOT write a bulleted list!

c) The point of the exercise, however, is difference: tell me how they are different vis-a-vis your theme. This is where you make your ideas precise. Do NOT write a bulleted list!

d) Stand back and turn your theme into a problem. Re-read what you have written. In this step, you write from the position of religion in general. As a result of steps b) and c), what new things can you see about either your theme, or about religions in general?

W Mar 23

## Christianity: The Practice of Confession

1) Genesis Two-Four.

2) Augustine, *Confessions*, 24-34. As you read this excerpt from Augustine, look for his re-telling of the Fall narrative (eating forbidden fruit).

3) Review your reading from Cleary's translation of the Quran about Adam and Eve, pages 6-8.

4) Mary Pat Fisher, "Central Beliefs in Christianity" and "Sacred Practices," in *Living Religions*, 158-171.

M Mar 28

review for test #2

~~Writing assignment using Geertz to analyze Christianity:~~

~~What is the story Christians tell themselves about themselves in the practice of **daily** confession (NOT what Catholics do today!)?~~

W Mar 30

**Test #2**

### **III. Suffering Creates Chaos: What is the Relation of History to Sacred Texts?**

M Apr 4

**Job**

1) Proverbs 8.

2) Job chapters 1-7.

3) Beal, chapter three, 35-45.

W Apr 6

1) Job chapters 38-42.

2) Beal, chapter four, 47-55.

M Apr 11

**Theoretical Interlude**

Elizabeth Grosz, *Chaos, Territory, Art*.

W Apr 13

**Writing assignment using Grosz to analyze ritual**

1. What is the frame or refrain?

2. What does the frame let you see? (Think: ideas, motivations and moods).

3. What affects are intensified and created as a result?

W Apr 27

**Paper #1 is due.**

### **V. Using Modern Reason to Create Order out of Religious Chaos: What is the Relation of Religion and Science?**

M May 2

**Religion and the State: Leviathan**

1) Beal, 89-01.

W May 4

**Science Studies: Modern Science, "Primitive" Religion, and the Crossed-Out God**

Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), pp. 1-3 and 13-29.

M May 9

Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 29-43.

W May 11

**Test # 3**



exam day

***Part Two of your Project is due.***

\* I took the image of the Psalter map from <http://www.us-israel.org/jsource/History/Psaltermap.html>. For other images, see: [The British Library](#), and the Map History discussion list's [Where Be "Here Be Dragons."](#)

Created by Ann Burlein

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