

The Nature of the Study of Religion: Religion and Modernity in Western Thought

RELIG 380 /CHID 380

Tuesday and Thursday 11:30am to 1:20pm

More Hall 220

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Office Hours: Wednesdays, 10-12, or by appointment

Course Description

This course provides students with a variety of approaches to the study of religion centered on examining the relationship between religion and modernity in the tradition of post-enlightenment, Euro-American scholarship. The central thesis of this course is that what we understand to be “religion” today was fashioned out of Western modernity, similar to other “modern” ideas such as science, democracy, the modern state, humanism, and capitalism. Religion is not a relic from a pre-modern period or the purview of non-modern, non-Westernized, irrational societies, but rather is the creation of the modern world itself. We will examine this thesis in relation to four broad disciplines: anthropology, sociology, history, and politics. As a survey course, we will tread lightly through these areas with the goal in mind to provide students with opportunities for future study and ideas for critically thinking about the history and role of religion in public culture today. For students interested in pursuing this thesis in the rest of the world outside European and North American societies, I offer a seminar called “Religion and Modernity in the Rest of the World”.

We will usually divide each class meeting this way each meeting:

Lecture for the first 50 minutes; 50 minutes of discussion or activity.

The activity will likely be one of these: 1) large group discussion; 2) small group discussions; 3) film or other media screening; 4) in class exam.

Assignments:

Your grade for this course will be distributed evenly among three components:

- **Participation**—Class participation is measured by active participation in the form of questions and comments during lecture; lively engagement with classmates in small and large group discussion; and generally positive investment in the learning environment of the class. We are a large class with no teaching assistant support and participating in such an

environment can be difficult. It is my job to help create possibilities for participation, but it is your job to interact with your classmates and the subject matter of the class intelligently and enthusiastically.

- **Weekly Media Assessment**—Once per week, by Monday, 10pm, you will post online a short assessment of some media you have observed (read, heard, watched, viewed, etc.) that is relevant to the subject of this course. This may be a news item, a film, a radio show, a book or article, a work of art—any media is valid. These are not formal papers, but postings should be clear, well considered, and should reference the materials and ideas of the course. The assessments should be no less than 250 words and no more than 500 words. Please do not quote extensively.
- **Two In-Class Written Exams**—You will complete two in-class written exams. These exams are to be (legibly) hand-written without the use of notes, books, or computers. The nature of the questions will allow many possible answers. A high grade will be determined by the quality of your thought in the essay, the organization of your response, and your ability to reference the ideas of the course.

Grading: I use the standard 4.0 grading system in use at the University of Washington. There are no formal papers for this class. In your written work (Weekly Media Assessment and In-Class Written Exam), I will read your materials for clarity of thought and depth of argument. I will want to see that you are using the materials of the class to think through the issues we discuss. In other words, rather than have you repeat the materials we've read, I'll want to see that you can apply the ideas we'll discuss in this class to the topics of the written assignments.

Readings: All readings for this course are online. You are responsible for downloading and printing all readings, and bringing them to class.

Syllabus: I reserve the right to change this syllabus, including the readings and assignments, as required.

Etiquette: Please do not use mobile phones or other devices in class. I request that you do not bring laptop computers to class, but rather take notes with pen and paper. Please do not eat in class. Please come on time and stay for the entire class.

Academic Conduct: I will strictly enforce the University of Washington Student Conduct code, including the policy on plagiarism. For your reference, the entire code can be found at <http://www.washington.edu/students/handbook/conduct.html>.

Disabled Students: If you would like to request accommodations due to a disability, please contact Disabled Student Services, 448 Schmitz Hall, 543-8924 (V/TDD). If you have a letter from Disabled Student Services indicating you require accommodations, please present the letter to me as soon as possible so that I can make necessary arrangements.

Syllabus

I. Religion and Modernity (Week One)

a. Tuesday: Introduction, review syllabus | March 30

- i. Discussion
 1. Review of syllabus
 2. Group activity: definitions of religion
- ii. No Reading

b. Thursday: What is modernity? What is religion? | April Fool's Day

- i. Lecture
- ii. Discussion
 1. Group Activity: Argue for or against the position that religion is antithetical to the principles of the Enlightenment.
- iii. Reading:
 1. Immanuel Kant, "What is Enlightenment?" (1784) at: <http://philosophy.eserver.org/kant/what-is-enlightenment.txt>.
 2. J.Z. Smith, "Religion, Religions, Religious," (1998): 269-284.

II. The sociological argument (Week Two)

a. Tuesday: Discovering "Religion" as a scientific category | April 6

- i. Lecture
- ii. Discussion
 1. Group Activity: Debate: Is religion rational?
- iii. Reading:
 1. Emile Durkheim, selections from *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912), pages 1-12, 34-44, 419-422.
 2. James Frazer, "Magic and Religion," (1922) online at: <http://www.bartleby.com/196/9.html> (paragraphs 1-16).

b. Thursday: Christianity, Capitalism, and Society | April 8

- i. Lecture
- ii. Discussion
 1. Group Activity: Debate: Is religion a fundamental part of economies and markets?
- iii. Reading:
 1. Max Weber, "Religious Affiliation and Social Stratification," and "The Spirit of Capitalism," 1904, pages 1-38.

III. The sociological argument (Week Three)

a. Tuesday: The Creation and Maintenance of Society | April 13

- i. Lecture
- ii. Screen first half of *The Matrix* (1999).
- iii. Reading:

1. Peter Berger, "Religion and World-Construction" and "Religion and World-Maintenance" from *The Sacred Canopy*, 1967, 1-52.
- b. Thursday: Belief and the Idea of the Cultural Field | April 15**
- i. Screen second half of *The Matrix* (1999).
 - ii. Discussion of readings and film.
 - iii. Reading:
 1. Pierre Bourdieu, "The Field of Cultural Production, or: The Economic World Reversed," In Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, NY: Columbia University Press, 1993, pp. 29-73.
- IV. The anthropological argument (Week Four)**
- a. Tuesday: Science, Magic, and Religion | April 20**
- i. Lecture
 - ii. Discussion
 - iii. Reading
 1. E. B. Tylor, "Religion in Primitive Culture," from *Primitive Culture* (1871), pgs 8-19, 80-86, 444-447. [Also online at Google Books]
 2. Malinowski, "Magic, Science, and Religion," (1925) online at: <http://www.adolphus.nl/xcrpts/xcmalinow.html> (entire)
- b. Thursday: In-Class Exam | April 22 [Professor out of town]**
- i. Come to class with sharpened pencils and eraser!
- V. The anthropological argument (Week Five)**
- a. Tuesday: Language, Symbols, and Structures of Belief | April 27**
- i. Lecture
 - ii. Discussion
 1. Individually chart out the symbolic system of any belief or social system with which you are familiar
 2. In groups, discuss these systems
 - iii. Reading:
 1. Claude Levi-Strauss, "The Structural Study of Myth," In Levi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, NY: Basic Books, 1963, pp. 206-231.
 2. C. Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," (1966), 87-125.
 3. V. Turner, "Liminality and Communitas," (1969), 94-130.
- b. Thursday: Making Religion into a Subject | April 29**
- i. Screen the Inauguration of President Obama (January 20, 2009; 22 minutes)
 - ii. Discussion
 1. Discuss the signs, myths, images, and language of the inaugural ritual
 - iii. Reading:
 1. R. Rappaport, "The Ritual Form," (1999):23-58.
 2. Talal Asad. "The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category," 27-54

VI. The historical argument (Week Six)

a. Tuesday: Spirit and the End of History | May 4

- i. Lecture
- ii. Discussion
- iii. Reading

1. Hegel, from *The Philosophy of History*, (1837) pgs 51-133.

b. Thursday: Marx and the Beginning of History | May 6

- i. Lecture
- ii. Discussion
- iii. Reading:

1. If you have not read this before, read this first: Marx and Engels, "The Communist Manifesto," entire (44 pages) at:

a. <http://www.anu.edu.au/polsci/marx/classics/manifesto.html>.

2. Marx, "A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right," Introduction, at:

a. <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critique-hpr/intro.htm>. (Approx. 10 pages).

3. "The German Ideology—Ideology in General" (1844–46), 93–100

4. "Concerning Feuerbach" (1845), 182–184

VII. The historical argument (Week Seven)

a. Tuesday: The Antagonism of Religion and History | May 11

- i. Lecture
- ii. Screen first half of *Blade Runner* (1982; 112 minutes).
- iii. Reading:

1. Mircea Eliade, "The Terror of History," (1954): 139-167.

2. Fasolt, C. "History and Religion in the Modern Age", *History and Theory*, Volume 45, Number 4, December 2006 , pp. 10-26(17).

3. Cladis, M. "Modernity in Religion: A Response to Constantin Fasolt's 'History and Religion in the Modern Age.'" *History and Theory*, Volume 45, Number 4, December 2006 , pp. 93-103(11).

b. Thursday: The Politics of Historical Progress | May 13

- i. Screen second half of *Blade Runner*
- ii. Discussion of Readings and film
- iii. Reading:

1. Fukayama, "The End of History," *The National Interest*, 1989 (approx. 20 pages), available here:

<http://www.wesjones.com/eoh.htm>.

2. Derrida, "Conjuring Marxism," *Specters of Marx*, 49-76.

VIII. The political argument (Week Eight)

a. Tuesday: How Did God Die? | May 18

- i. Lecture
- ii. Screen first half of *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1989, 104 minutes)
- iii. Reading:
 1. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §§125, 290, 299, 335, 341, 343.
 2. Nietzsche, "The Religious Nature," online at:
<http://records.viu.ca/~johnstoi/Nietzsche/beyondgoodandevil3.htm>.

b. Thursday: The Disciplining Power of Religion | May 20

- i. Screen second half of *Crimes and Misdemeanors*
- ii. Discussion of reading and film
- iii. Reading:
 1. Michel Foucault, "Religious Deviations and Medical Knowledge," (1962) "Philosophy and the Death of God," (1966) "On Religion" (1978): 50-56, 85-87, 106-110.
 2. Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" (1984): 32-50.

IX. The political argument (Week Nine)

a. Tuesday: The Relatives and Absolutes of Religion in Conflict | May 25

- i. Lecture
- ii. Discussion
- iii. Reading
 1. Muhammad Atta's Letter:
http://www.fpp.co.uk/online/01/11/WTC_Atta_Letter.html
 2. Bruce Lincoln, "Mr. Atta's Meditations, Sept. 10, 2001: A Close Reading of the Text"
<http://divinity.uchicago.edu/martycenter/publications/webforum/122002/commentary.shtm>
 3. Mark Juergensmeyer, "What's Religion Got To Do With It?"
<http://divinity.uchicago.edu/martycenter/publications/webforum/122002/commentary.shtm>

b. Thursday: The Nation and Religion | May 27

- i. Lecture
- ii. Discussion
- iii. Reading:
 1. Robert Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," (1967), pgs 168-187.
 2. Samuel Huntington (1993), "The Clash of Civilizations," pgs 22-49.

X. The political argument (Week Ten)

a. Tuesday: In Class Exam | June 1

b. Thursday: Religion in the Nation | June 3

- i. Screen *Collision* and discuss.