

RELIGION 211-002
Religions of the West
Spring 2016, T/Th 3:00 - 4:15, Music/Theater Building 1006
Prof. John Turner
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Office Hours: T, 12-1; Th, 2-3; or by appointment

Course Description:

In this course, students explore the history, scriptures, beliefs, and practices of the major monotheistic religions that originated among the peoples of the Near East: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Students will examine these three religious traditions thematically and comparatively, in order to understand the similarities, differences, and relationships among them. While the primary focus is on the origins, scriptures, and history of each religious tradition, we will also analyze contemporary developments, in particular the relation of each tradition to matters of violence and gender / sexuality, respectively. Finally, students will receive a brief introduction to Mormonism, a church arising out of American Christianity.

Course Objective:

By the end of this course, students will know the general history of these three monotheistic religions, and have an understanding of their scriptural traditions, their respective beliefs regarding the nature of God and God's relationship to the world, their institutional structures, ritual practices and ethical concerns.

Class Procedures:

The format of this class will be a combination of lecture and discussion. Students should come to class having read the assigned material and should be prepared to discuss those readings in class. Materials on Blackboard should be printed and brought to class. Grades are based upon an exam, a take-home final exam, a series of short writing assignments, and class participation.

Required Readings:

1. *The Harper Collins Study Bible, Student Edition* (2006 edition)
 2. *The Qur'an*, trns. M.A.S. Abdel Haleem (2010 edition)
- Purchase hardcopies of the above editions of the Bible and Qur'an, even if you own or use different versions. We need to all be on the same page in class (literally).
3. Individual readings on Blackboard. Print these and bring them to class.

Grade Evaluation:

Midterm Exam: 25%
Nine Short Assignments: 36%
Final Essay: 25%
Reading Quizzes / Class Participation: 15%

Attendance: Students are expected to attend all class sessions. The exam will draw on lectures for material not readily available elsewhere. For most students, whether or not they attend class is the single best indicator of their performance in the course. Also, poor attendance will reduce your participation grade. Correspondingly, I will "boost" your overall grade for perfect or near-perfect attendance.

Honor Code: There will be no tolerance for plagiarism or any other Honor Code violation in this course. Plagiarism consists of presenting the writing, research, or analysis of others as one's own. It applies not only to the lifting of the verbatim text of another author's work without quotation marks and accurate citation, but also to the taking of specific information, analysis or opinions— even if not in the exact words of the author him/herself— and presenting them without citation in one's own paper. This applies both to material in printed format and to material found on internet sites. Any instance of outright plagiarism, as described above, or cheating on an exam will be reported to the Honor Council, and the minimum penalty will be a grade of "F" on this paper or exam. Moreover, the student will not be given the opportunity to rewrite the paper or re-take the exam.

Classroom Etiquette

No laptops or other electronic devices in class without special permission from the instructor.

Disability Services

If you are a student with a disability and you need academic accommodations, please see the professor and contact the Office of Disability Services (ODS) at 993-2474. All academic accommodations must be arranged through the ODS. <http://ods.gmu.edu>

Important Semester Enrollment and Withdrawal Dates

Students are responsible for verifying their enrollment in this class.

Schedule adjustments should be made by the deadlines published in the Schedule of Classes.

After the last day to drop a class, withdrawing from this class requires the approval of the dean and is only allowed for nonacademic reasons.

Policy on late short assignments: Due at the start of class. No late short assignments.

Course Outline: Read all assignments for the date on which they are listed.

Jan. 19 Introduction

Jan. 21 Monotheism and Pluralism

READ: Rita Gross, "Religious Diversity: Some Implications for Monotheism," in *Cross Currents*, Fall 1999. [PDF]

WRITE: One-page, double-spaced response paper, with one paragraph summarizing Gross's argument and one paragraph in response to it. **Submit by the start of class on Jan. 21 via Blackboard as "Short Assignment #1."**

Jan. 26 Ancient Near East Religion and Introduction to the Hebrew Bible / Tanakh

Optional: Ronald Hendel, "Israelite Religion," in *Harper Collins Study Bible* [HCSB], xlv-xlviii

Jan. 28 In the Beginning

READ: *Epic of Gilgamesh* (selection) [PDF]
Genesis 1-10

WRITE: One-page, double-spaced response paper. Describe what you see as the chief similarities between the Gilgamesh epic and the account of the flood in Genesis. What do you make of those similarities? **Submit via Blackboard as Short Assignment #2.**

Feb. 2 From Abraham to Moses

Genesis 11:26 - 12:9; read chapters 16, 17, 21, 22, 37; skim remaining Genesis chapters Exodus 1-3, 11-14, 19-20, 23:20-33 [skim intervening Exodus chapters]

COME TO CLASS PREPARED TO SHARE THREE QUESTIONS OR THOUGHTS ABOUT THE READINGS.

Feb. 4 From the United Kingdom to No Kingdom

1 Samuel 17; 2 Samuel 11-13

Feb. 9 From Temple Judaism to Rabbinical Judaism

Feb. 11 Visit with Rabbi Mendel Deitsch

Feb. 16 The Gospel of Mark

Mark (all of it)

WRITE: Write one, double-spaced paragraph on each of the following questions": What are Jesus's core teachings? What do you learn about Satan and demons in the Gospel of Mark? What do you learn about the relationship between Jesus and God? Why is Jesus hesitant to reveal his identity? Then, list three questions you have about the text. **Submit via Blackboard as Short Assignment #3.**

Feb. 18 Early Christianity

Acts 1-2, 9-11:18, 15:1-21
Romans 1-8

Feb. 23 Christianity and Monotheism

Feb. 25 The Origins of Islam

Haleem, trns., *The Qur'an*, "Introduction"
Qur'an, 1. "The Opening"

March 1 Source Criticism and the Qur'an

12. "Joseph"
Genesis 37-50 (skip 46 if you wish)
Pregill, "The Hebrew Bible and the Quran" [.pdf]

WRITE: One paragraph that summarizes Pregill's main argument, then a one-page, double-spaced response to his essay that discusses Sura 12 ("Joseph") in light of the Joseph narrative in Genesis. **Submit via Blackboard as Short Assignment #4.**

March 3 Islam: Pillars and Practices

March 15 Jews, Jesus, and the Qur'an

3. "The Family of 'Imran," 33-64
4. "Women" (verses 153-162)
5. "The Feast"

March 17 Exam

March 22 Religion and Violence

Philip Jenkins, *Laying Down the Sword*, introduction

WRITE: One paragraph summarizing Jenkins's main argument. Then a 1.5-page, double-spaced analysis of his introduction. **Submit via Blackboard as Short Assignment #5.**

March 24 Judaism, Zionism, and Palestine

Review Exodus 23:20-33;
Deuteronomy 20:16-20;
I Samuel 15;
Isaiah 2:1-4; 11:1-9

March 29 Christianity, Peace, and Violence

READ: Reinhold Niebuhr, "Why the Christian Church Is Not Pacifist" [PDF]

WRITE: One paragraph summarizing Niebuhr's argument against pacifism. Then a 1-page, double-spaced analysis of the strengths *and* weaknesses of that argument. **Submit via Blackboard as Short Assignment #6.**

March 31 The Qur'an, Early Islamic History, and Violence

READ: 2. "The Cow," 190-195
9. "Repentance," 1-42

April 5 Islam and the Modern World

READ: Nasr, Seyyed Hossein, *Islam in the Modern World*, chapter one [PDF]

WRITE: Two-page response paper, double spaced. How does Nasr describe the Muslim response to modernity (i.e., secularization, Western influence / conquest, etc.)? **Submit as Short Assignment #7.**

April 7 Sexuality and Patriarchy, Ancient and Modern

April 12 What does the Bible Teach?

READ: Galatians 3:23-29
Ephesians 5:21-6:9
2 Timothy 2:8-15
"Men, Women, and Biblical Equality"
(http://www.cbeinternational.org/sites/default/files/english_2.pdf)
"Danvers Statement"
(<http://cbmw.org/about/danvers-statement/>)

April 14 Islam and Women

2. "The Cow," 221-233

4. "Women," 1-35

33. "The Joint Forces"

Rhys Williams and Gira Vashi, "*Hijab* and American Muslim Women: Creating the Space for Autonomous Selves"

WRITE One paragraph summarizing Williams and Vashi's main argument. Then a one-page, double-spaced response. **Submit via Blackboard as Short Assignment #8.**

April 19 Religion and Same-Sex Relationships / Marriage

April 21 Mormonism (Part I)

Joseph Smith, First Vision [PDF]

April 26 Mormonism (Part II)

Book of Mormon, excerpts [PDF]

Joseph Smith, "King Follett Discourse," [PDF]

"Proclamation on the Family" [PDF]

WRITE One double-spaced page comparing the Book of Mormon to the other scriptures we have read this semester. Then one paragraph on each of the following: What new ideas about God and human beings does Joseph Smith introduce in his "King Follett Discourse"? What is the view of men and women expressed in the "Proclamation on the Family?" **Submit via Blackboard as Short Assignment #9.**

April 28 TBA

Take-home final exam essay due Tuesday, May 3, submitted electronically by midnight.

Exam Format

I. Identify the following quotations by book (e.g., Tanakh, New Testament, Qur'an). [Worth two points each]

Example: In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

II. Answer **four** of the following six questions. [Worth ten points each].

1. Describe the three main branches of contemporary American Judaism. Do more than list -- describe their respective approaches to modernity. You might consider keeping kosher or an approach to the historicity of scripture as examples.

2. What are the five pillars of Islamic practice? Identify and explain.

3. What is the Christian belief in the Trinity? How and when did this belief develop?

4. How does the Qur'an depict Jesus?

5. What is the significance of exile in the Tanakh?

6. What differentiated early Christianity from its Jewish roots? In other words, how and why did Jewish followers of Jesus stop being Jewish?

III. Describe the sacred texts of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In so doing, answer as many of the following questions as you are able. You may organize your answer in any manner you see fit. [Worth forty points]

Which writings are scripture for each faith? [You do not need to list individual books, but describe the contents of scripture as far as you are able].

In which languages were these sacred texts written?

According to modern scholarship, how did the contents of those books take shape? [In particular, you may wish to discuss the Documentary Hypothesis and the Synoptic Theory]. Note: discussing these theories does not imply agreement with them.

How and when did those collections of scripture become fixed or canonized?

What authoritative sources of scriptural interpretation, if any, exist for each tradition?

Final Exam Essay Guidelines

Contrast the stances of two specific groups of Jews, Christians, and Muslims on an issue pertaining to either violence or gender / sexuality [explain]. Choose two groups from two separate traditions (i.e., one Jewish and one Muslim group, not two different groups of Jews).

1. The first step is to select two groups. For Jews, you might consider -- in the American context at least -- Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, or Ultra-Orthodox. For Christians, Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox is really too large of a division. Instead, choose African Pentecostals, Mormons, the Anglican Church, Copts, U.S. Catholics, etc. For Muslims, it might be more useful to break things down geographically or among various Sunni movements (Wahhabi, Salafi, or even something like the Council on American-Islamic Relations).

2. Then choose an issue: acceptance/rejection of homosexuality/same-sex marriage; stance toward women in terms of marriage, education, leadership; attitudes toward war or toward any particular current conflict. [There are other possibilities -- do not restrict yourself to the above examples].

3. Do research. Identify at least three "print" sources (start early, in case you have to order things from other libraries), either books or scholarly articles. Even if you access them as .pdf's, scholarly articles still count as "print" sources. They are probably printed somewhere! You may also use additional sources that you find electronically, but spend some time assessing the source of the information before using it. Check with me if questions arise. Include a works cited page with your essay.

4. Identify at least two passages of scripture (for example, from the Bible or Qur'an or Book of Mormon) that are relevant for your topic. See if you can figure out how the groups you have chosen have interpreted or otherwise used those passages.

5. Write a five-page essay summarizing your findings. The paper can be extended by one page, but not more. It must be double-spaced, with one-inch margins, in 12 point font.

Here are some particular guidelines to follow as you write:

- The paper must have proper citations—in either footnote or parenthetical author and page number format—for both direct quotations and specific facts or ideas taken from an outside source.
- The paper must include a thesis statement that summarizes your basic argument/conclusion and structures the essay.
- Your essay must be your own original work, composed without assistance from others (in the class or not) or undocumented sources. You are welcome to discuss the assignment with others in the class; however, when it comes to writing the essay, it is not a group assignment. Please see the university plagiarism policy for more details.

Assignment of Grades for Final Essays

Your essay will be closely scrutinized (and receive a grade from 0 to 25) in the following five areas:

Thesis Statement and Argument -- Does the essay have a clear thesis statement?

Evidence -- Is the argument / thesis supported by evidence from the assigned readings?

Writing -- Is the essay free of spelling and grammar mistakes? Is it clearly and eloquently written? Does the essay provide appropriate citations?

Organization -- Does the essay progress clearly and logically? Does the organization of paragraphs and sentences effectively advance the essay's argument / thesis?

I will then add those four grades to compute the overall grade for the essay. I also reserve the prerogative to award bonus points for intellectual creativity and engagement (i.e., does the essay make a particularly compelling or thoughtful argument, etc.?)

You are not required to submit a draft of this essay; however, I would be pleased to discuss with you your thoughts / concerns about the essay or any drafts that you submit.