RELI 211: Religions of the West  
Spring 2019 Syllabus

Instructor: David Tassell  
Schedule: Monday & Wednesday 1:30-2:45 PM  
Email: dtassell@gmu.edu  
Office Hours: By appointment (email)

**The instructor reserves the right to change or otherwise alter the syllabus throughout the semester. It is ultimately up to you to check for updates to the syllabus in Blackboard.**

Course Description

This course focuses on Judaism, Christianity, and Islam from historical, comparative, and cross-cultural perspectives. Background for this study is set up by examining the academic study of religion and various definitions of religion. Further background is provided in ancient Near Eastern Religion and its comparison to Western religion. Finally, the legacy and impact of Western religions on modern, Western society is examined, encouraging thoughtful engagement with history and dialog across differences.

Learning Outcomes

Students who satisfactorily complete this course will be able to:

1. Recall basic information about the history, practices, texts, and common beliefs of ancient Near Eastern religion, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.
2. Articulate the significance of religion in the development of modern, Western society.
3. Compare the similarities and differences between Western religions.
4. Engage thoughtfully in cross-cultural and interfaith dialog.
5. Engage critically with the legacy of religion in the modern, Western political order.

Course Requirements

1. **Reading & Discussion:** Students are expected to read the course materials each week and come to class prepared to discuss the material. Student contributions to discussion should reflect content from the texts and lectures. Productive discussion requires preparation and participation from everyone. Reading responses in Blackboard will be required some weeks. **15% of grade.**
2. **Critical Analysis Essay:** Students will be required to submit a 2-3-page, double-spaced essay (please use correct MLA formatting and source citation) regarding the definition of religion. More instructions will be given in class. **15% of grade.**
3. **Group Assignment:** Students will form groups of 4-5 in order to research and present on either Judaism, Christianity, or Islam (limit of 3 groups per religion). Presentations should respectfully examine some aspect of history, belief, or practice in the religious tradition chosen. I encourage creativity in your presentations, and each presentation should include a visual aid. Presentations should be 10-15 minutes, not including Q&A (but please be prepared for Q&A on your presentation). It is up to your group to divide the work equally (do not ask me to “make” one of your group members do their work). All group members will receive the same grade. More instructions will be given in class. **25% of grade.**
4. **Tests (2)** – Two closed-book tests will be given throughout the semester. One test will cover ancient Near Eastern religion and Judaism. The second test will cover Christianity and Islam. Tests will consist of multiple choice and true/false questions. **10% of grade (each).**
5. **Final Exam**: A final comprehensive exam during exam week consisting of multiple choice and true/false questions will be taken by all students. **25% of grade.**

    Late work will not be accepted (and will receive a 0%) unless previously approved by Mr. Tassell. Failing to show up on time to take a test or final exam will result in a failing grade on the test or exam.

**Required Texts**

You are not expected to purchase any texts for this course. All texts will be provided on Blackboard in PDF format. Readings will be available by the end of day each Friday for the following week. Please ensure you log on to Blackboard each week to download readings.

**Communication Policy**

Mason faculty and staff are required by Virginia law to use their Mason emails in communications with students. Students, in turn, should use their MasonLive email accounts to receive information related to our class. I will not respond to messages sent from or send messages to a non-Mason email address.

I will attempt to respond to all questions by email as soon as I am able, which generally means within 24 hours on weekdays and 48 hours on weekends.

**Classroom Policies**

**Controversial Subject Matter**

In this class we will be discussing subjects that some students may consider controversial. Others may find some of the readings and/or comments in class to be challenging. Our purpose in this class is to explore these topics deeply and consider multiple perspectives and arguments. Students are expected to listen to one another respectfully but are free to disagree with views expressed in class or in the readings. If you are uncomfortable with how the class approaches a topic, please talk to the instructor.

**Attendance Policy**

Class attendance is at the discretion of each student. However, students will be responsible for all course materials regardless of attendance, as well as any announcements made in class. Students who miss a test or the final exam will receive a grade of zero for that test. Since part of the course grade is class discussion, being absent frequently will affect your grade. Moreover, the instructor will be very clear about what students are expected to know on the tests, and missing class may mean missing opportunities to know what is on the tests.

**Electronic Device Policy**

Cell phones, laptops, tablets, etc. are permitted in the classroom (on silent). I encourage everyone to have a device with them as we will utilize them for some class activities.

**Disability Accommodations**

If you have a learning or physical difference that may affect your academic work, you will need to furnish appropriate documentation to the Office of Disability Services. If you qualify for accommodation, the ODS staff will give you a form detailing appropriate accommodations for your instructor. In addition to providing your professors with the appropriate form, please take the initiative to discuss accommodation with them at the beginning of the semester and as needed during the term. Because of the range of learning differences, faculty members need to learn from you the most effective ways to assist you. If you have contacted the Office of Disability Services and are waiting to hear from a counselor, please tell me.
Course Schedule

Part 1: Defining & Studying Religion

Week 1 – 1/21: Martin Luther King, Jr. Day (NO CLASS)
1/23: Course Introduction, Syllabus

Week 2 – 1/28: Defining Religion: Part 1
1/30: Writing & Discussing Religion

Week 3 – 2/4: Defining Religion: Part 2
Reading Due: Selections from Anatomy of the Sacred (Livingston)
Reading Due: Selections from Elementary Forms of the Religious Life (Durkheim)

2/6: The Modern Study of Religion
Due: Group Project Sign-Up
Assignment Due: Critical Analysis Essay

Part 2: Ancient Near Eastern Religion

Week 4 – 2/11: Ancient Near Eastern Religion: Introduction
2/13: Ancient Near Eastern Religion: Creation Myths
Reading Due: Genesis 1-2, Selections from Enuma Elisha

Week 5 – 2/18: Ancient Near Eastern Religion: Flood Myths
Reading Due: Genesis 6-9, Selections from The Epic of Gilgamesh

Part 3: Religions of the West

2/20: Judaism in History
Reading Due: Selections from Genesis, Selections from Exodus

Week 6 – 2/25: Sacred Texts in Judaism
2/27: The Faith & Practice of Judaism
Reading Due: Selections from There Shall Be No Needy: Pursuing Social Justice Through Jewish Law and Tradition (Jacobs)

Week 7 – 3/4: Group Presentations on Judaism
3/6: Test 1

Week 8 – 3/11: Spring Break (NO CLASS)
3/13: Spring Break (NO CLASS)

Week 9 – 3/18: Christianity in History
3/20: Sacred Texts in Christianity  
Reading Due: *The Gospel According to Luke*

**Week 10 – 3/25:** Faith & Practice in Christianity

**3/27:** Group Presentations on Christianity

**Week 11 – 4/1:** Islam in History

4/3: Sacred Texts in Islam  
Reading Due: Selections from *The Qur’an*

**Week 12 – 4/8:** Faith & Practice in Islam  
Reading Due: Review Pew Research data on U.S. Muslims

**4/10:** Group Presentations on Islam

**Week 13 – 4/15:** **Test 2**

4/17: Judaism, Christianity, & Islam  
Reading Due: Selections from *God is Not One* (Prothero)

**Part 4: Western Religion & Society**

**Week 14 – 4/22:** Western Religion & Society: The Nation-State  
Text: Selections from *Migrations of the Holy* (Cavanaugh)

4/24: Western Religion & Society: America  
Text: Selections from *American Covenant* (Gorski)

**Week 15 – 4/29:** Western Religion & Society: The Holocaust  
Text: Selections from *Complicity in the Holocaust* (Ericksen)

5/1: TBD

**Week 15 – 5/6:** Final Exam Review

**FINAL EXAM:** SEE UNIVERSITY SCHEDULE FOR TIME AND DATE DURING EXAM WEEK