

RELI 100 (004): Human Religious Experience

(Introduction to the Study of Religion)

Department of Religious Studies

George Mason University

Fall 2023 | T/Th 10:30-11:45

Music/Theater Building, Rm. 1007

Instructor: Dr. Walter Staggs, PhD (he/him/his)

Office Hours: M/W 12pm-1pm or by appointment (including virtual)

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COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course examines a variety of phenomena understood across cultures as human religious experience. Specifically, the course is designed to examine why certain, subjective experiences are categorized by different peoples as 'religious' and why these subjective, religious experiences are then codified into ritual and ceremony in the belief that subjective experience is capable of functioning as objective reference.

In order to accomplish this, the course is divided into two parts. The first part provides various theoretical frameworks by which to evaluate religious experience: theories on what constitutes religion and religious experience, psychological needs of religious participants, economy of religion considerations, and the role of emotion and intellect in religious experience. The second part consists of making use of these frameworks to analyze religious experience in the following traditions: Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and the Paranormal.

Finally, this course makes no value judgments as to the validity of any specific religious belief. There will be no assertions or assumptions, in other words, that one religion holds more

accurate beliefs about the nature of reality than another. Each religious perspective will be assessed on its own terms in order to honor the dignity of its adherents.

COURSE OBJECTIVE

This course aims to provide a means for participants to recognize, appreciate, and evaluate the phenomenon of religious experience. In other words, the course is not so much about what to think about religious experience as it is about learning how to make use of conceptual resources in order to limit one's own idiosyncratic (and often unintended) prejudices that could inhibit a fair consideration of any phenomena under investigation. This ability to make use of a perspective to examine another perspective—even while holding one's own differing perspective on the issue at hand—is the hallmark of what it means to be educated and reasonable in society. It is how one learns to become aware of one's own biases, even those biases that might be reasonable, for not all biases are negative. A bias is simply a predisposition to think a certain way that stems from one's worldview and cultural upbringing. Thus, this course provides ample opportunities for one to begin reigning in one's own biases through the act of informed analyses and meaningful dialogue.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Participants who complete this course will be able to do the following:

- analyze and evaluate a religion according to its own fundamental precepts, especially those of ritual, symbolism, sacred texts, cosmology, and belief in the Other;
- be familiar with the major religions of the world and their parameters for what constitutes accepted religious experience;
- describe and distinguish among a diverse selection of methodological approaches to the study of religion and religious experience;
- demonstrate critical thinking and self-awareness about assumptions implicit in a variety of theoretical models in the study of religion;

- discuss the complexity, ambiguity, and cultural range implicit in the concepts of religion and religious experience.

COURSE PROCEDURES

The format of this class will be a combination of lecture and discussion. Students should come to class having read or watched the materials assigned for each day and should be prepared to discuss that material in class. Materials in Blackboard should be printed out and brought to class—already marked up with reading notes. Grades are based upon the following: 1) the submission of weekly notes from lectured material, 2) a midterm film analysis, 3) quizzes on assigned reading material, 4) a final exam reflective analysis, and 5) course participation.

ASSIGNMENTS AND GRADE WEIGHTS

The Weekly Submission of Notes (20% of final grade): Course participants will submit a total of ten (10) weekly notes, each taken during Weeks 1-6 and 9-13. Notes must make use of the template provided, be typed, organized, and coherent. Notes that are indecipherable will not be accepted. Notes must be submitted as a Microsoft Word document (.docx) or a PDF (.pdf).

(****Lecture notes will not be provided due to missed class. It will be the responsibility of the participant to secure notes from another class participant.)

Midterm Film Analysis (25% of final grade): Course participants will submit an analysis of the film reviewed in-class during Week 7. The analysis must make use of the theoretical frameworks from Weeks 1-6. For more information, see assignment prompt in Blackboard.

Reading Quizzes (20% of final grade): During weeks 2-6 and 9-13, course participants will take ten (10) quizzes that must be completed before the first class of its given week. Quizzes are open-book, and participants will be allowed one week to complete quizzes in Blackboard.

These quizzes cannot be made up if missed due to the fact that material from the quizzes will be discussed once class begins.

Final Project: Reflective Analysis (25% of final grade): Course participants will submit a reflective analysis based on the content provided. The exam is comprehensive and open-source. For more information, see assignment prompt in Blackboard.

Course Participation (10% of final grade): Active participation is required for this course, which is defined as, but not limited to, engaging in thoughtful discussion in class, asking subject-appropriate questions, and/or attending a religious service and submitting a writing assignment according to directions provided.

LATE ASSIGNMENT POLICY (Does Not Include Quizzes)

Assignments submitted late will be penalized 10 points (one letter grade) every 24hrs. After four (4) days, the assignment will no longer be accepted for credit but will receive feedback. Should extenuating circumstances arise, it is the participant's responsibility to reach out to the professor immediately, and extensions will only be granted on a case-by-case basis. Failure to plan ahead does not constitute an extenuating circumstance.

REQUIRED COURSE MATERIALS

Texts:

- Prothero, Stephen. *God Is Not One: Eight Rival Religions That Run The World*. ISBN: 978-0-06-157128-2.
- All other readings/viewing materials will be provided in Blackboard.

Software:

- **Blackboard** is a required tool for the course where you will find course materials, links for uploading course assignments, and posted grades. If you are unfamiliar with how to use Blackboard, please view this quick tutorial provided by GMU:
(<https://its.gmu.edu/knowledge-base/blackboard-instructional-technology-support-for-students/>)
- Students have free access to **Microsoft Office 365** via GMU and are therefore required to submit all writing assignments in Word format (.docx) or as otherwise directed.

COURSE ATTENDANCE POLICY

Because this course meets twice per week, participants are allowed two (2) absences without penalty to be used at their discretion. Any absence thereafter will be considered unexcused and will negatively impact the participant's engagement factor.

Participants arriving late to class will be marked down for tardiness. Two (2) instances of tardiness will result in an unexcused absence. Tardiness of twenty-five (25) minutes or more will be regarded as an unexcused absence. This includes leaving class early without permission.

Waivers will be considered on a case-by-case basis and may require a doctor's note or some other form of verification in order to excuse the absence.

(This course also abides by GMU's COVID Policy: [.https://www.gmu.edu/safe-return-campus](https://www.gmu.edu/safe-return-campus))

MASON CORE STATEMENT

This course is part of the Mason Core (General Education) Program, which is designed to help develop "a Mason Graduate [who is] an engaged citizen, a well-rounded scholar, and someone who is prepared to act for the world" (Mason Catalog). It fulfills the Mason Core Lower Written Communication requirement. For more information on the Mason Core, visit the Provost's

Mason Core page: <https://provost.gmu.edu/academics-and-research/undergraduate-education/mason-core>.

MASON IMPACT COURSE



As a Mason Impact course, this course contributes to the preparation of Mason graduates as engaged citizens and well-rounded scholars who are prepared to act.

TECHNOLOGY REQUIREMENTS AND POLICY (FACE TO FACE, HYBRIDS)

Students may use laptops to take notes, but the professor reserves the right to ban their use should students abuse the privilege and engage in distracting behavior. All electronic devices must be on silent, and phone calls/texts may not be accepted in class.

RECORDING PRIVACY POLICY

Recording class sessions is not allowed, nor is the sharing of recorded sessions or instructional videos from the course. This is a FERPA privacy violation for all course users and an Honors Code violation.

GMU EMAIL

Due to FERPA requirements, all official course communications will take place via GMU email. This is also university policy. Because of this, I will not reply to emails generated outside the university system, as FERPA requirements cannot be guaranteed.

When sending emails, always provide a greeting with the recipient's preferred name and use preferred pronouns if known. For me, I go by Dr. Staggs (he/his/him). Equally important,

explain who you are, which pronouns you prefer, which section of ENGH 101 you're taking, and sign your name at the end.

METHODS OF INSTRUCTION

In order to accommodate the wide variety of learning styles, this course makes use of multiple forms of delivery (lectures, videos, readings, various multimedia, etc.). While this is not a lecture class, students are expected to take notes and engage in groups for the sake of sharing notes. Some assignments are based on lecture notes.

Students should also expect to devote approximately 6-9 hours per week on course assignments and readings. Students should expect this time range to increase during research- and writing-heavy weeks.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS AND GRADING PERCENTAGES

All grades will be posted regularly in Blackboard and will be viewable through the MyGrades link.

- **Percentage Break-Down of Final Grades:** A+ 100-97.5% | A 97.4-93% | A- 92.9-90% | B+ 89.9-87.5% | B 87.4-83% | B- 82.9-80% | C+ 79.9-77.5% | C 77.4-73% | C- 72.9-70% | D 69.9 – 60% | F below 60%
- **Midterm Grades:** You will receive a midterm grade in PatriotWeb around Week 5. That grade is meant to help you understand how you are doing so that you can make any adjustments necessary. It is not meant to predict your final grade, as the work in the rest of the semester is more heavily weighted.

MAJOR ASSIGNMENT GRADING STANDARDS

- A “C” level grade (70-79%) denotes competent college-level writing and achievement. The writer responds to the specified rhetorical situation: he or she meets, to some degree, all the assignment requirements, and employs some key strategies for communicating their ideas to their targeted audience. The assignment has a central focus, presents some support; it is appropriately organized for the genre. Assignments that do not meet these criteria will not earn a “C.”
- A “B” level grade (80-89%) highlights a strong example of college writing and thinking. In addition to meeting the “C” level requirements, the writer goes further in some way(s): they demonstrate some insight into the “gray areas” of the topic, and provides original or thorough support that is tightly woven into the text.
- An “A” level grade (90-100%) denotes an assignment that engages the reader in a provocative conversation. Even more than in a “B” essay, the writer anticipates and responds to possible reader questions, uses a wide range of supporting evidence, structures arguments and analyses to create a fluid reading experience, and provides unexpected insights.
- “D” and “F” level essays do not meet the basic expectations of the assignment.

INCLEMENT WEATHER/CLASS CANCELLATION POLICY (online classes excluded)

Should the university close due to inclement weather or COVID, all information will be posted in Blackboard. Participants should also pay close attention to university announcements via GMU email.

(***Should class be canceled, the instructor will provide an assignment on Blackboard to keep everyone on track so participants do not have to make up the missed class.)

GMU COVID/MASK POLICY

<https://www.gmu.edu/safe-return-campus>

UNIVERSITY STATEMENT ON PLAGIARISM

It is expected that participants adhere to the George Mason University Honor Code as it relates to integrity regarding coursework and grades: "To promote a stronger sense of mutual responsibility, respect, trust, and fairness among all members of the George Mason University community and with the desire for greater academic and personal achievement, we, the student members of the University Community have set forth this: Student members of the George Mason University community pledge not to cheat, plagiarize, steal and/or lie in matters related to academic work." More information about the Honor Code, including definitions of cheating, lying, and plagiarism, can be found at the Office of Academic Integrity website at <http://oai.gmu.edu>

Instructors in the Religious Studies Program support the Mason Honor Code, which requires them to report suspected instances of deliberate plagiarism to the Mason Honor Committee.

STATEMENT ON A.I. GENERATED TEXT

We have multiple writing assignments in this class. Because the act of composing a response in your own words actually increases your learning, it is important that you complete the task yourself, rather than rely on an artificial intelligence (AI) tool. Completing these writing assignments yourself will help strengthen your performance in this class on later assignments and activities, as well as help you develop professionally and succeed in your career goals. You should also be aware that AI text generation tools may present incorrect information, biased responses, and incomplete analyses; thus they are not yet prepared to produce text that meets the standards of this course. If you do choose to experiment with AI text generation, you are expected to indicate your usage of it and give credit for text that has been generated by AI. Use of AI-generated text without proper attribution is a violation of academic integrity.

STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Disability Services at George Mason University is committed to providing equitable access to learning opportunities for all students by upholding the laws that ensure equal treatment of people with disabilities. If you are seeking accommodations for this class, please first visit <http://ds.gmu.edu/> for detailed information about the Disability Services registration process. Then please discuss your approved accommodations with me. Disability Services is located in Student Union Building I (SUB I), Suite 2500. Email: ods@gmu.edu | Phone: (703) 993-2474.

GMU NONDISCRIMINATION AND DIVERSITY POLICIES

George Mason University is committed to providing equal opportunity and an educational and work environment free from any discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, national origin, sex, disability, military status (including veteran status), sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, age, marital status, pregnancy status or genetic information. George Mason University shall adhere to all applicable state and federal equal opportunity/affirmative action statutes and regulations.

The University is dedicated to ensuring access, fairness and equity for minorities, women, individuals with disabilities, and veterans (as covered by law) in its educational programs, related activities and employment. George Mason University shall thus maintain a continuing affirmative action program to identify and eliminate discriminatory practices in every phase of university operations.

Any employee who becomes aware of sexual harassment or other potentially discriminatory behavior must contact **The Office of Compliance, Diversity, and Ethics**: (703) 993-8730.

Retaliation against an individual who has raised claims of illegal discrimination or has cooperated with an investigation of such claims is prohibited.

NOTICE OF MANDATORY REPORTING OF SEXUAL ASSAULT, INTERPERSONAL VIOLENCE, AND STALKING:

As a faculty member, the instructor for this course is designated as a “Responsible Employee,” and must report all disclosures of sexual assault, interpersonal violence and stalking to Mason’s Title IX Coordinator per University Policy 1412. If you wish to speak with someone confidentially, please contact one of Mason’s confidential resources, such as [the Student Support and Advocacy Center](#) (703-380-3686, 33686 on campus) or [Counseling and Psychological Services](#) (703-993-2380, 32380 on campus). You may also seek assistance from Mason’s Title IX Coordinator by calling 703-993-8730 (38730 on campus) or emailing cde@gmu.edu.

ESSENTIAL STUDENT RESOURCES

- **Use The Writing Center:** Take advantage of the Writing Center as you work on written assignments in this course. You can book free real-time appointments to meet individually with a tutor or to submit a draft for written feedback. Tutors will work with you on any phase of a writing project. In addition to free individual tutoring sessions (by appointment), the center has an [outstanding website](#) that offers resources for writers. To schedule an appointment, go to writingcenter.gmu.edu, register, and use the online scheduler. For more information on the Writing Center, watch their [video about their online services](#). Send any questions to wcenter@gmu.edu.
- **Use The Mason Library:** Librarians are available in person and virtually to help with your research. More information on online library services are available [here](#). The [library’s website](#) offers tutorials, research resources, and databases that we’ll use throughout the semester. You can also visit the library, and study or use computers there, but you will need to complete the daily health check online all semester to physically visit campus: healthcheck.gmu.edu.

- **CAPS (Counseling and Psychological Services):** [CAPS](#) offers free counseling and academic workshops and a 24/7 student crisis line: (703) 993-2380. Services are provided by professional counseling and clinical psychologists, social workers, and counselors. CAPS' individual and group counseling, workshops and outreach programs are designed to enhance students' personal experience and academic performance.

SSAC (Student Support and Advocacy Center)

- **Stay Mason Student Support Fund:** The Mason Emergency Assistance Fund is designed to provide temporary, short-term assistance to students experiencing financial hardship. The fund is available to all students, regardless of immigration status. For information and updates about available funding, visit [Student Emergency Assistance Funding – University Life \(gmu.edu\)](#)
- **Resources for Multilingual Writers:**
- [ESL Writing Support at the Mason Writing Center](#)
- Workshops and Tutoring at the Language Resource Center in Mason's Global Center. To register for reading, speaking and writing support: <https://intomason.mywconline.com/>

IMPORTANT DATES

The policy and dates for each semester are available on the Registrar's website:

<https://registrar.gmu.edu/calendars/>

COURSE SCHEDULE

Due Dates

- Quizzes due *before class begins* on Tuesdays for their given week.
- Notes Syntheses are due Fridays by 11:59pm Blackboard time.
- Midterm Film Analysis due Thursday (10/12) by the beginning of class.
- Final Exam (Reflective Essay) due Wednesday (12/6) by 11:59pm Blackboard time. This assignment may not be turned in late.

Week 1 (8/21 - 8/27): Defining Religion and Religious Experience

- Readings: Begin reading for Week 2
- Assignments:
 - Notes (Thursday Lecture Only)

Week 2 (8/28 - 9/3): Plato and The True, The Good, and The Beautiful

- Readings:
 - Plato's *Allegory of the Cave* (PDF in Blackboard)
 - Excerpts from Plato's *Symposium* (Web link in Bb)
- Assignments:
 - Quiz
 - Notes

Week 3 (9/4 - 9/10): Thomas Kuhn and Paradigm Theory

- Readings:
 - "Thomas Kuhn: Paradigm Shift" (Web in Bb)
- Assignments:
 - Quiz
 - Notes

Week 4 (9/11 - 9/17): Hans-Georg Gadamer and Hermeneutics

- Readings:

- "Hermeneutics" (Web in Bb)
- Assignments:
 - Quiz
 - Notes

Week 5 (9/18 - 9/24): Wayne Proudfoot and Religious Experience

- Readings:
 - Journal Article | "Wayne Proudfoot's *Religious Experience*" by Matthew Bagger
- Assignments:
 - Quiz
 - Notes

Week 6 (9/25 - 10/1): Priestly v. Prophetic Traditions

- Readings: TBA
- Assignments:
 - Quiz
 - Notes

Week 7 (10/2 - 10/8): Midterm Movie Analysis

- Readings: None
- Assignments:
 - Midterm Movie Analysis: *Sleepy Hollow* DUE Thursday 10/12 by the beginning of class.

Week 8 FB (10/9 - 10/15) No Class Tuesday 10/10: Dogma v. Doctrine

- Readings: None
- Assignments: NONE

Week 9 (10/16 - 10/22): Judaism and Torah

- Readings:
 - Prothero | Ch. 7: Judaism “The Way of Exile and Return”
- Assignments:
 - Prothero Quiz
 - Notes

Week 10 (10/23 - 10/29): Christianity, Sin, and Salvation

- Readings:
 - Prothero | Ch. 2: Christianity “The Way of Salvation”
- Assignments:
 - Prothero Quiz
 - Notes

Week 11 (10/30 - 11/5): Islam and Fasting

- Readings:
 - Prothero | Ch. 1: Islam “The Way of Submission”
- Assignments:
 - Prothero Quiz
 - Notes

Week 12 (11/6 - 11/12): Hinduism, The Caste System, and Reincarnation

- Readings:
 - Prothero | Ch. 4: Hinduism “The Way of Devotion”
- Assignments:
 - Prothero Quiz
 - Notes

Week 13 (11/13 - 11/19): Buddhism and Nirvana

- Readings:
 - Prothero | Ch. 5 "The Way of Awakening"
- Assignments:
 - Prothero Quiz
 - Notes

Week 14 (11/20 - 11/26) Thanksgiving Break

- Readings: None
- Assignments: None

Week 15 (11/27 - 12/2): Ancient Astronaut Theory

- Readings:
 - "Ezekiel's Spaceships" (PDF in Bb)
 - "Ancient Astronaut Theory" (Web in Bb)
- Assignments:
 - Final Exam (Reflective Essay) DUE Wednesday 12/6 no later than 11:59pm Blackboard time. This assignment may not be turned in late.

(The instructor for this course reserves the right to alter the syllabus at any time during the semester in order to better facilitate learning outcomes. All such changes will be announced in class and posted in Blackboard.)