

**What IS Religion? Rel 198 Fall, 2006**

**Tues/Thurs 2:20 –3:30 pm; Comenius 201**

**Instructor: Kelly Denton-Borhaug, Commenius 214**

**Feel free to email/phone me for an appt. or pop by during office hours. I encourage all students to see me in my office at least one time during the semester.**

**Office Hours: M/W 2:20 – 3:30 pm**

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**Course Description:** What IS “religion”? In this course we will attempt to arrive at our own “thick descriptions” regarding the nature, meaning and phenomenon of religion(s) and religious experience in human lives. Exploring the ways religion functions in the lives of individuals as well as in the construction, maintenance and daily life of societies, our primary goal will be to think deeply and critically about the ways our own lives and our social understandings and structures are impacted by religious understandings, systems, values, practices, and searching.

**Course Goals:**

- 1) Students will gain an introductory understanding of some important methods of inquiry within the field of religious study, including sociological/historical (Smith, Wuthnow), theological/philosophical (Tillich, Rasmussen), anthropological (Eck), psychological (James).
- 2) Students will work to develop their own “thick description” of religion(s).
- 3) Students will gain insight regarding ways their own lives and understandings are shaped/impacted by religious constructions.
- 4) Students will improve their reading, critical thinking, imaginative, speaking and writing skills.

**Course Requirements:**

*Attendance and preparation for alert, intelligent participation in class.* Students are expected to read with a pencil in hand, making notes in the margins of the texts we read so that you don't lose your own questions/ideas as you read. Work hard as you read to identify the main points and thread of the text's argument, and go back over your reading to make sure you have understood. This deliberate reading will prepare you for active participation in class. ***Bring whatever text we are reading with you to class!*** 25% of your overall grade will depend upon your prompt, engaged and regular attendance ( the only excused absences are for family emergency, serious illness or religious observance, AND must be approved by professor BEFORE the given class). You should take notes during lectures and discussions, actively participate in discussions (plan on speaking up at least twice every class session), and demonstrate leadership in small group work.

***Special Note:*** *Active liberal arts learners stretch themselves to build their skills for intelligent, thoughtful, inquisitive, critical and empathetic listening AND public speaking in the classroom – I expect every member of our class to be working at the building of these skills in every class session. If this presents any worry to you, please come see me in my office early in the semester. I can help!*

*Short Papers:* 40% of your grade will be the cumulative grade of the short papers you will write as we complete each section of the course. More details will be given about these papers early in the semester.

*Group Presentation:* 15 % of your total grade will be compiled from your small group presentation to the entire class near the end of the semester. These presentations will be based on the premise of Diana Eck's book regarding the huge increase in religious plurality in the U.S. More details to follow!

*Final Exam:* 20% of your grade will be based on a comprehensive take-home final examination. The exam will cover all the material of the semester and will require you to write possibly two extended essays. We'll take class time to help you organize small study groups to help each other prepare.

*Students are advised to review the Academic Honesty Policy in the Student Handbook (available online) and required to follow the guidelines therein.*

**Important Note:** Various assignments and many course resources will be posted on Blackboard. Students are advised to become familiar with this Moravian online course resource. Let me know if you need assistance. This syllabus will be posted on Blackboard, and updated with any changes we find we need to make as we progress through the semester.

### **Required Texts (available in the bookstore)**

Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown*

Tillich, Paul. *The Dynamics of Faith*

Rasmussen, Larry, *Earth Community, Earth Ethics*

Diana L. Eck, *A New Religious America: How a "Christian Country" Has Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation*

Other readings and films/web resources as assigned

### **Schedule for our semester**

8/29 Introduction to course

#### Section One: What IS Religion?

8/31: "The Meaning of Religion"

Reading: William James, *Varieties of Religion*, pp 31-60 (on library reserve; check out the book and make your own copy of the selections we'll be reading so that you can mark on them and bring them with you to class.)

9/5 "The 'truth' of Religion?"

Reading: James, *Varieties of Religion*, pp 61-89

9/7 "What does religious experience look like?"

Reading: Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950's*,

Pp 1-18 (on library reserve; make your own copy and bring it with you to class)

9/12: "The Religious Individual"

Reading: Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, chapters 1-2

9/14 "The Language of Religion"

Reading, Tillich, chapter 3.

9/19: **First paper due at beginning of class in hard copy. Your 4-5 page, double-spaced paper will draw upon these first readings and our class discussion to focus on this question: What do these writers contribute to your own thinking about the phenomenon, meaning and experience of religion? What IS religion? What do you notice about the different methods of inquiry utilized by James and Tillich? What is significant about each? Reflect on the change in your definition of religion from the first day of class to now.**

Section Two: Reflective Imagination and the Student of Religion

**Important Note: Each of the reading assignments in Section Two is accompanied by a brief writing assignment. Those assignments may be found in the Blackboard Discussion Board link for this course. You are to complete the assignment and send it online through Blackboard by the specified deadline.**

9/22: Smith, *Imagining Religion*, Introduction and Chapter One

Blackboard assignment (note my outline of the Introduction in Course Documents and use it as an example for these assignments)

9/26 Smith, Chapter Three

Blackboard assignment

9/28 Smith, Chapter Four

Blackboard assignment

10/3 Smith, Chapter Six

Blackboard assignment

10/5 Smith, Chapter Seven

Blackboard assignment

*Fall recess Oct. 7 noon to Oct. 11, 7:30 am*

10/13 **Second paper due at beginning of class in hard copy, 4-5 pages, double-spaced. Questions to focus your paper are in Blackboard in the Assignments link.**

Section Three: Case Study #1: The “Practice” of Religion/Spirituality and the Wellbeing of the Earth

10/12 “A Sociological Analysis of Spiritual Practice”

Reading: Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven*, pp168-198 (on library reserve)

Begin your plant journal this week (instructions posted in Blackboard)

In Class: presentation on college student spiritual self-identity

10/17 “I’m Spiritual but not Religious”

Rasmussen, Preface and Introduction, *Earth Community*

Donna Schaper, “Me-First `Spirituality’ Is a Sorry Substitute for Organized Religion on Campuses,” (article from the Chronicle of Higher Ed, plus letters to the editor in response, all on library reserve)

Continue to observe the practice of your plant journal

10/19 Rasmussen, *Earth Community*, *Earth Ethics* Part I: Earth Scan

Read: “A Slow Womb,” “Three Revolutions or Four?” “Environmental Apartheid”

Continue sitting and writing in your journal

10/24 Part I: Earth Scan

Read: "Ecumenical Earth," "Creation's Integrity," "Fish Stories," "Conclusions"  
Journal observance

11/26 Rasmussen, Part II

Read: "Trees of Life," "Returning to Our Senses," "The Cross of Reality"  
Journal observance

10/31 Rasmussen, Part II

Read: "Song of Songs"  
Journal observance

11/2 Rasmussen, Part III

Read it all!

11/7 ***Third paper due at beginning of class, hard copy, 4-5 double-spaced pages.***

***Questions to focus your paper are on Blackboard. Attach your plant journal as an addendum (journal need not be typed).***

#### Section IV: Case Study #2: The Most Religiously Diverse Country in the World

11/9 Diana Eck, *A New Religious America*

Read: Preface and Introduction

11/14 Eck, "From Many, One"

Familiarize yourself with the small group assignment for this section posted in Blackboard; bring your own copy of the assignment with you to class.

In class: Begin surfing the online website, *The Pluralism Project*

Divide into small groups for final research project

11/16 Small groups will use class time to work on their group project/presentation

***Note: Please carefully read through and utilize the guidelines for the small group research projects/presentations in Blackboard Assignments***

Read: "Afraid of Ourselves"

*Thanksgiving recess: Nov. 21, 10 pm to Nov. 27, 7:30 am*

***Suggestion: Make sure every member of your small group is confident about her/his assignment for your final project; plan to WORK over Thanksgiving while you digest! Catch up on healthy food, exercise and sleep for the last push of the semester!***

11/16 Each small group will meet with the professor for about 20 minutes (we'll have a sign-up sheet) and review its progress toward their group presentation. Come prepared to make a thorough report; and bring any questions, anxieties or other issues you are struggling with as you prepare this assignment.

11/28 Group Presentations: American Hindus. . . American Buddhists

12/1 Group Presentations: American Muslims. . . Debriefing of the assignment

12/5 Read: "Bridge Building: A New Multireligious America"

12/7 In class: Study Guide for final exam, plus comparison and contrast of the diverse methods of inquiry and learnings over the semester. Course Wrap-up and evaluations

**final exam:** time and date TBA. The final exam will include one essay question that will focus on the second case study we have explored; and a second essay question that will

invite you to draw from a variety of resources we have studied this semester (the second question will be drawn directly from your study guide).