

## What IS Religion? Rel 110 Spring, 2007

Mon/Wed 2:20 –3:30 pm; Comenius 201

Instructor: Kelly Denton-Borhaug, Comenius 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: T/TR, 11 – 12:30 PM; you may also make an appointment with me or stop by and see if I am available

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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, identify those same main elements in your text’s margins, 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; consult Blackboard documents for guidelines on how to write a superb paper.

*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. Please also note that your grades will be regularly posted on your Blackboard site, and you may consult them at any time during the semester if you wish to see your overall grade.

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

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

Tillich, Paul. *The Dynamics of Faith*

Tom Beaudoin, *Consuming Faith: Integrating Who We Are with What We Buy*

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

### **Required Extra-Class Events**

**1/18, Thursday, 7:20 PM, Prosser Auditorium**

**Rev. Nelson-Pallmeyer's lecture, "A Violent World in Need of Peace: One Peacemaker's Journey through the Pitfalls and Promises of Faith"**

**Look ahead in our syllabus to see the final group research project, which will involve you doing off-campus visiting of religious sites and interviewing of individuals.**

Other readings and films/web resources as assigned

### **Schedule for our semester**

1/15 Introduction to course

#### Section One: What IS Religion?

1/17 Special Guest: Rev. Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer: *Is Religion Killing Us?*

Reading: Handout: Selection from NP's book (Bring your handout to class with at least one question/comment you wish to present to our guest)

**1/18, Thursday, 7:20 PM, Prosser Auditorium**

**Required attendance at Rev. Nelson-Pallmeyer's lecture, "A Violent World in Need of Peace: One Peacemaker's Journey through the Pitfalls and Promises of Faith"**

*Please be prompt so that you can sign the attendance sheet prior to our lecture; we will plan to sit together at the front of the auditorium*

1/22 "The Meaning of Religion"

Reading: William James, *Varieties of Religion*, Lecture II: "Circumscription of the Topic" (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.)

1/24 "The 'truth' of Religion?"

Reading: James, *Varieties of Religion*, Lecture III: "The Reality of the Unseen" (Make your own copy from library reserve)

1/29 "The Religious Individual"

Reading: Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, chapter 1, "What Faith Is"

1/31 "The Language of Religion"

Reading, Tillich, chapter 2, "What Faith Is Not"

2/5 "Symbols of Faith,"

Reading, Tillich, Chapter 3, "Symbols of Faith"

2/7 "The Life of Faith"

Reading, Tillich, Chapter 6, "The Life of Faith"

**2/12 *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 Assignment link for this course. You are to complete the assignment and send it online through Blackboard by the specified deadline.***

2/14 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)

2/19 Smith, Chapter Four

Blackboard assignment

2/21 Smith, Chapter Six

Blackboard assignment

2/26 Smith, Chapter Seven

Blackboard assignment

2/28 Class Summary of Smith, and exercise to help us write our papers

**Second paper: 4-5 pages, double-spaced. Questions to focus your paper are in Blackboard in the Assignments link.**

**Important Note: Your paper is due at the professor's office (Comen 214) by Friday, Mar. 2, 9 PM.**

### **Spring Recess: Mar. 3 – Mar 11**

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

3/12 “A Sociological Analysis of Spiritual Practice”

“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)

In Class: presentation on college student spiritual self-identity

**Important Note: Our reading of Beaudoin's book will be accompanied by an exercise to be outlined in Blackboard documents and discussed in class.**

3/14 Tom Beaudoin, *Consuming Faith*

Read: Preface through end of Chapter Two

3/19 Beaudoin, *Consuming Faith*

Read: Chapters Three and Four

3/21 Beaudoin, *Consuming Faith*

Read: Chapters Five to end of the book

3/26 Beaudoin, *Consuming Faith*

Read: Chapter Six and Appendix

3/28 In Class: Wrap-up of Beaudoin, discussion of papers

**Third paper due at beginning in professor's office box by Friday, 3/30 by 9 PM, hard copy, 4-5 double-spaced pages. Questions to focus your paper are on Blackboard.**

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

4/2 Diana Eck, *A New Religious America*

Read: Preface and Introduction

4/4 Eck, “From Many, One”

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

Divide into small groups for final research project

**Note: Before class, please carefully read through the posted guidelines for the small group research projects/presentations in Blackboard Assignments**

#### *Easter Recess: 4/7 –4/9*

Over Easter Recess, in addition to working on your individual assignment for your group research project, please read in Eck: “Afraid of Ourselves”

4/11 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, including a report on each individual's research assignment; and bring any questions, anxieties or other issues you are struggling with as you prepare this assignment.

4/16 Group Presentations: American Hindus. . . American Buddhists

4/18 Group Presentations: American Muslims. . . Debriefing of the assignment

4/23 Read: "Bridge Building: A New Multireligious America"

4/25 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:** Take home. 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).