

## What IS Religion? Rel 110 A/B Fall, 2011

Mon/Wed A: 8:55 – 10:05; B: 1:10 – 2:20

**Instructor: Kelly Denton-Borhaug, Comenius 109, Religion and Philosophy Suite**  
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’ experience of ultimate reality, 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 develop an introductory understanding of some important methods of inquiry within the field of religious study, including sociological/historical (Smith, Berger), theological/philosophical (Tillich, Rodrigue), anthropological (Mahan and Forbes), psychological (James).
- 2) Students will create their own “thick description” of religion(s).
- 3) Students’ skill and insight regarding ways their own lives and understandings are shaped/impacted by religious constructions will deepen.
- 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 every time!*** 10% 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:* You will write three five-page double spaced papers for this course as we complete each section of our study. More details will be given about these papers early in the semester; consult Blackboard documents for guidelines on how to write a superb paper. Each paper is worth 20% of your total grade.

*Group Presentation:* 10 % 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 draw on your careful study of Mahan and Forbes, and involve you using your own awareness and imagination to use their methodologies to draw upon and analyze contemporary examples of the intersection of religion and popular culture in the U.S. More details to follow!

*Final Exam:* 20% of your grade will be based on a comprehensive take-home final examination. In this exam you will use all the material of the semester in order to create your own “thick description” of the primary question of our course: what IS religion?. 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)**

Peter Berger: *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological*

Jonathan Z. Smith, *Relating Religion, Imagining Religion* (these selections will be available in Blackboard Course Resources)

Tillich, Paul. *The Dynamics of Faith*

Bruce David Forbes and Jeffrey H. Mahan, eds., *Religion and Popular Culture in America*

William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience* (available in Blackboard Course Resources)

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

**1/15, Thursday, 10 to noon, Dr. Jonathon Kozol**

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*, 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.)

9/5 “The ‘truth’ of Religion?”

Also: read the introduction to Hillary Rodrigues and John S. Harding, *Introduction to the Study of Religion* (posted in Blackboard)

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

9/7 “The Religious Individual”

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

9/12 “The Language of Religion”

Reading, Tillich, chapter 2, “What Faith Is Not”

9/14 “Symbols of Faith,”

Reading, Tillich, Chapter 3, “Symbols of Faith”

9/19 “The Life of Faith”

Reading, Tillich, Chapter 6, “The Life of Faith”

9/21: Review and planning for the writing of your first paper

9/23: Friday: ***First paper due at beginning of class in hard copy. Your 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. You are responsible for dropping off the hard copy of your paper to Dr. Denton-Borhaug’s in-box on her office door by 4 pm. More guidelines and support for the writing of this and other short papers will be posted in our Blackboard shell.***

### Section Two: A Sociology of Religion

9/26: “Religion and World Building”

Reading: Peter Berger, chapter 1, pp 1-28

9/28 “Religion and World Maintenance”

Reading: Berger, chapter 2, pp 29-51

10/3 The Crisis of Evil”

Reading: Berger, Chapter 3, pp 53-80

10/5 “The Problem of Alienation”

Reading: Berger, Chapter 4, pp 80-104

10/10 Fall Recess

*Fall recess Oct.8 noon to Oct. 12, 7:30 am*

***10/12 Second paper due at beginning of class in hard copy, 4-5 pages, double-spaced. Questions to focus your paper are posted in Blackboard in the Assignments section.***

### Section Three: The Historical Study 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 Assignments link for this course. You are to complete the assignment and send it online through Blackboard by the specified deadline.***

10/17 Smith, *Imagining Religion*, Introduction

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

10/19 Smith, *Relating Religion*, Chapter Four: “The Topography of the Sacred”

Blackboard assignment

10/24 Smith, *Relating Religion*, Chapter Five: “Manna, Manna, Everywhere and ///”

Blackboard assignment

10/26 Smith, *Relating Religion*, Chapter Six, “The Domestication of Sacrifice”

Blackboard assignment

10/31 Class Summary of Smith, and exercise to help us write our papers

***November 2: Second paper due at the beginning of class: 5 pages, double-spaced.***

***Questions to focus your paper are in Blackboard in the Assignments link.***

### Section Three: Case Study: Understanding and Analyzing the Intersection of Religion and Popular Culture in the U.S.

11/7 Forbes and Mahan, *Religion and Popular Culture*, Introduction, Conclusion, Chapter One

1/9 Forbes and Mahan, *Religion and Popular Culture*, Chapters 2, 3, and 4

11/14 Forbes and Mahan, Chapters 5, 6, and 7

11/16 Forbes and Mahan, Chapters 9, 10, 13,

(professor away at conference beginning November 18, Friday, through Thanksgiving Recess – ending on Nov. 27)

11/21 Small groups meet together to work on class analysis/presentation

11/23 Small groups meet together to work on class analysis/presentation

11/28 Forbes and Mahan, Group time and continued work on Forbes and Mahan, focusing on the three distinct methodologies, Read: Chapters 11, 12

11/30 Forbes and Mahan, Chapters 12, 14, and review the Conclusions

12/5: Class presentations

12/7: Class presentations, distribution of final take home exam, course evals, and wrap up of course.

**final exam:** Take home. The final exam will include one essay question that will invite you to draw substantively, creatively and intelligently from everything we have studied and analyzed this semester to create your own “thick description” in response to the question: what IS religion? We will decide together on a due date for the submission of your take home exam.

