

What IS Religion? Rel 110 Spring 2016

Mon/Wed 10:20 -- 11:30;

Instructor: Kelly Denton-Borhaug, Comenius 305, 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: M/W 2:30 -- 3:30 PM; T 10:30 -- 12:30; you may also make an appointment with me or stop by and see if I am available
denton-borhaugk@moravian.edu; 610 625-7104

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, Rodriguez), psychological (James) and more.
- 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; after one unexcused absence, additional unexcused absences will each result in a .25 reduction in your overall grade). 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. A significant part of this 10% will be based on your performance in “pop quizzes.” These are very short quizzes at the very beginning of class that help us to be honest about our reading.

-- **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 four-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 Rieger, and involve you using your own awareness and imagination to this resource's methodologies to draw upon and analyze the intersection of religion, economy and class 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.

--**Class Etiquette -- You may bring beverages to class; please do not eat or bring food. Please only use computers or tablets for accessing course materials; refrain from any other digital activity during class.**

--Students who wish to request accommodations in this class for a disability should contact the Academic Support Center, located in the lower level of Monocacy Hall, or by calling [610-861-1401](tel:610-861-1401). Accommodations cannot be provided until authorization is received from the Academic Support Center.

Required Texts

Peter Berger: *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological* (for purchase in the Bookstore)

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

Joerg Rieger, *Religion, Theology and Class: Fresh Engagements after a Long Silence* (for purchase in the bookstore)

Paul Tillich, *The Dynamics of Faith* (for purchase in the bookstore)

William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience* (available as a free ebook through the online resource, *Project Gutenberg*)

Required Extra-Class Event: Tuesday, April 12, 6:30 pm, Prosser Auditorium: The Moravian College 9th Peace and Justice Scholar in Residence Keynote Address: Claude Anshin Thomas, Vietnam Veteran, Buddhist Monk and Peace Activist
All students are required to attend this event; please make appropriate plans with your workplace and/or sports team now. If you have a conflict with another class, please respectfully request that your professor give you permission to attend this event.

Other readings and films/web resources as assigned

Schedule for our semester

1/18: Introduction to course

What is religion?

How to learn and grow in this course through careful reading, annotation, taking notes, time devoted to study, strategies for writing short papers, etc.

Section One: What IS Religion?

1/20 “The Meaning of Religion”

Reading: William James, *Varieties of Religion*, Lecture II: “Circumscription of the Topic”

1/25 **SNOW DAY!! :)**

1/27 James on “The ‘truth’ of Religion?”

Reading: James, *Varieties of Religion*, Lecture III: “The Reality of the Unseen”

2/1 “The Religious Individual”

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

Also, please carefully read and annotate chapters one and two from *Introduction to Religious Studies* (this selection is posted in Blackboard)

2/3 “The Language of Religion”

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

2/8 “Symbols of Faith,” **CLASS CANCELED!**

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

2/10 “The Life of Faith”

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

Review and planning for the writing of your first paper; Discuss selection from Myhre, *Introduction to Religious Studies*

2/14, midnight: ***First paper due to the BB submission link. Your 4 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? Thoughtfully and carefully outline each of their arguments with respect to our course question, 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. Submit by attaching your word doc to the to BB assignment link. Please DO NOT cut and paste your assignment, but use the attachment link instead. This will make grading more efficient for me.***

2/15: Guest teacher: Dr. Gloria Chien

Section Two: A Sociology of Religion

2/17: “Religion and World Building”

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

2/22 “Religion and World Maintenance”

Reading: Berger, chapter 2, pp 29-51

2/24 The Crisis of Evil”

Reading: Berger, Chapter 3, pp 53-80

2/29 “The Problem of Alienation”

Reading: Berger, Chapter 4, pp 80-104

3/2 Review of Berger

3/6, Sunday by midnight: ***Second paper due at beginning of class in hard copy, 5 - 6 pages, double-spaced. Questions to focus your paper are posted in Blackboard in the Assignments section. Please post your second paper according to the BB instructions in the syllabus.***

March 5 through March 11: Spring Break!

Section Three: The Historical/Anthropological Study of Religion

3/14 Jonathan Z. Smith, “‘Religion’ and ‘Religious Studies’: No Difference at All” (BB docs)

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

3/16 Smith, *Imagining Religion*, “The Bare Facts of Ritual” (BB docs)

Blackboard assignment

3/21 Smith, *Imagining Religion*, “The Devil in Mr. Jones” (BB docs)
Blackboard assignment

3/23 Talal Asad, “The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category” (BB Docs)
Blackboard assignment

3/28 Class Summary of Smith and Asad, and time for questions. *Note: We may end class early.*

April 1, midnight: Third paper due to BB submission link, approximately 5 pages, double-spaced. Questions to focus your paper are in Blackboard in the Assignments link.

4/14 to 4/17: Prof away at a conference

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

3/30 *Everyone will read:* Introduction: “Why Class Matters in Religious Studies and Theology,”
led by Dr. Denton-Borhaug

4/4 Time for Teams to work on their projects

4/6 Team work continued; Teams report individually to Dr. Denton-Borhaug regarding their outline for leading the course

4/11 (No Class: Students will attend the Tuesday night, April 12 lecture by Claude AnShin Thomas)

Tuesday, April 12, 6:30 pm, Prosser Auditorium: The Moravian College 9th Peace and Justice Scholar in Residence Keynote Address: Claude Anshin Thomas, Vietnam Veteran, Buddhist Monk and Peace Activist
All students are required to attend this event; please make appropriate plans with your workplace and/or sports team now. If you have a conflict with another class, please respectfully request that your professor give you permission to attend this event.

4/13: Note: Class today will be held in conjunction with the IDIS course, “What is Peace?” We will meet in the HUB UBC and have opportunity for additional learning and interchange with Claude AnShin Thomas.

Our final unit of study will involve us in a case study of analyzing “religion on the ground.” I have chosen a recently published book, an anthology of writers who are concerned about the relationship between religious studies/theology and matters of class, race, ethnicity and gender: *Religion, Theology and Class*, Joerg Rieger, ed. New York: Palgrave, 2013.

In this final unit, students will form groups of 3- 4 to lead half of a class session. I have outlined the following readings below for groups of three to choose from, and we will take time on 3/14 to form our groups.

Dr. Denton-Borhaug will model the class format that we will use for this final unit on 3/30.

1. Every group will begin with an overview of their chapter, in which the purpose, argument and central questions of the chapter are clearly laid out. This should take about 10 minutes of your time overall.
2. Each group then will focus on specific examples/illustrations that the group has identified for the entire class to address, discuss, work through. In other words, you will focus on a particular compelling example that illustrates and enfleshes the problem, ideas, questions, argument laid out in your chapter.
3. Each group will have approximately 25 minutes total for their class leadership. As opposed to writing a paper, each member on the group will be graded according to the quality and depth of their class study, organization and leadership for the day. “A” level leadership will:
 - involve all members of the group equally in presentation of the chapter argument;
 - demonstrate that the group has worked hard to understand their given chapter and think through an intelligent, creative and interesting way to present the chapter argument to the class;
 - spend no more than 10 minutes laying out the chapter argument; then the group succinctly identifies a compelling example or illustration that is linked to the argument of their chapter, and in a creative and compelling way, elicits class discussion/involvement in thinking through the illustration together. Note: *This will involve the group working together to develop a strategy for leading/inviting their classmates’ involvement;*
 - Captains will have responsibilities for providing leadership and organization for their group: Captains will: make sure that the group meets; make sure that tasks for the group are equally divided between members and make sense; report to the prof (when she asks) for an accounting of each member’s involvement (or lack thereof); be involved in “pulling everything together” at the end to make sure that the project is well in hand for presentation/class participation.

Final Note: Everyone has ONE CHAPTER per class session that s/he is responsible for carefully and thoughtfully preparing for EACH CLASS during this final unit. At the beginning of class there will be a quiz each day to “keep us honest” with respect to this part of our preparation. This reading is on top of the required reading/preparation for your class leadership.

Group A: Everyone whose last name begins with A -- C

Group B: Everyone whose name begins with D - Z

Schedule for final unit:

4/18 *The entire class will read:* Chapter 2: “Save Us from Cynicism: Religion and Social Class”

led by: Precious, Andrea, Jessica and Victoria

Captain: Andrea

4/20 *Group A will read:* Chapter 3: “Class, Sin, and the Displaced”

led by: Dan, Matthew H., Marina and Chase

Captain Matthew H.

Group B will read: Chapter 5: “Religion and Class in the Construction and Deconstruction of the Myth of American Exceptionalism”

led by: Sabrina, Lindsay, Theresa and Beth

Captain Sabrina

4/25 *Group A will read:* Chapter 6: “Protesting Classes through Protestant Glasses: Class, Labor, and the Social Gospel in the United States”

led by: Matthew C, Kevin B., Connor, Lucas, Alexa

Captain Connor

Group B will read: Chapter 7: “Poverty and Poor People’s Agency in High Tech Capitalism”

led by: Will, Spencer, Samantha, Bradley

Captain Samantha

4/27 *The entire class will read:* Chapter 9: “Black Reconstruction: Thinking Blackness and Rethinking Class in Late Capitalist America”

led by: Andrew, Anthony, Kevin C., Eli

Captain Andrew

Note: On our final day of class, we also will complete the course evaluation

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?

Due: Tuesday, May 3 by noon. (*Note: If this presents a difficulty for you in terms of conflicts with other exam deadlines, please speak with me*)

