

Comparative Religion

Dr. Julie Ingersoll

Sample Syllabus

Office Hours T/TH 12:05-1:30 (and by appointment)
Email: jingerso@unf.edu

Building 10, 2223
Phone: 620-1330

Course Description

This course will introduce students to one of the two primary approaches to Religious Studies: Comparative Religion (sometimes called the History of Religions). The other, complementary, approach being the Social Scientific Study of Religion as Culture. Though it is not primarily a World Religions course but rather a course emphasizing the comparison of various religions, I have added material on World Religions in response to student interest.

We will begin with an introduction to the academic study of religion, followed by a brief survey of five of the world's major religious traditions. We will then move to a discussion of theoretical categories, from the study of religion, intended to provide a framework for comparison: myth, ritual, religious experience, and religious institutions. To help students understand and work with these categories we will illustrate each with examples from various world religions.

As a result of this course, students should be familiar with the complexities inherent in the effort to define religion; be able to describe religions in a non-evaluative manner; be able to find significant similarities and differences among religions and other forms of human behavior, and to develop insight about religion by critically bringing together theoretical perspectives and data. Since this course fulfills the University's "Cultural Diversity" requirement, the University's "General Education Outcomes" are included at the end of this syllabus.

Required Books and Readings

Studying Religion: an Introduction Through Cases, Kessler
The Complete Idiot's Guide to World Religions, Toropov and Buckles

Course Requirements and Grading

There will be four tests (not cumulative) and a written project, each worth 20% of your final grade. There will be no final exam though I will be available during the final exam period to meet with you with your grades for the course. You should record your grades as you get them to have a running tally of how you are doing in the course.

The final project for this class will be a group project in which you will create your own religion and write a term paper about it, using the various categories we will study throughout the semester (each represented by a chapter in the middle section of our book). During our last week of class you will present to the class the various aspects of the religion you create. Your attendance at this session (and thereby your participation in a group presentation) is required and your grade on your written project will include credit for being there or a deduction for being absent.

It is imperative that you come to class and that you come prepared to participate in our discussion of the course materials. Your grade will depend on it. When I say that you should "be prepared" for each class, I mean that you should have completed the assignments for the day and that you should have spent some time reflecting on these assignments and their significance for the issues we are discussing. Meaningful participation requires that you engage constructively with the ideas presented in the readings, by me, and by your fellow students.

Course Guidelines

Classroom etiquette: students are expected to be in their seats on time for class. If you come in after I have taken attendance, I will not go back and mark you present. Late-comers are distracting and any student who is repeatedly late for class will be asked to remain outside. I expect that for the hour and fifteen minutes we have together that you be entirely

present. You should not be checking email, texting, carrying on a conversation with a classmate apart from our shared conversation, getting up to leave the room, sharpening your pencils, throwing away trash etc.

I rarely accept excuses for late work. If you encounter an absolutely unavoidable problem in meeting a deadline for an assignment, see me as early as possible; **do not assume that you will be permitted to make up missed work—including tests.** The earlier I know about a problem the less it looks like poor planning and the more sympathetic I am likely to be. However, computer problems and the like are inevitable and you should plan for them. Should extensions/make-ups be granted grades on those assignments would be significantly reduced. I do not accept assignments over email.

In accordance with the editorial policy and practice with the majority of publications in our field, I require that students in my classes make use of gender inclusive language. The terms "man," "mankind," and so forth, and the pronoun "he" are not considered generic. This applies to references to human beings only; references to deity (and, of course, all material attributed to others) should be true to the usage of those about whom you write.

Plagiarism (the using of another's ideas and/or words without proper citation) is a serious offense and it occurs, perhaps most often, inadvertently. Be careful to keep track of your sources while doing research because even inadvertent plagiarism will result in a failing grade for that assignment. In serious cases of plagiarism I reserve the right to assign a failing grade for the course.

Finally, please take advantage of my office hours to get whatever help you need. You are not, however, limited to my office hours. Feel free to come by my office at other times as well; if I am there, you are welcome. **If you cannot meet me at the times I have set aside, I will make arrangements to meet with you.** Just ask.

Course Outline

PART ONE: The Academic Study of Religion

Introduction to the course and to each other;
read and discuss McCutcheon

DISCUSSION TOPIC: Studying Religion

READ: 1-12

WRITE: answers to questions 1, 6 (12)

IN CLASS: read and discuss Muesse

Be sure you understand what is required in the academic study of religion and how it might be different from the faith-based practice/study of religion.

DISCUSSION TOPIC: Defining Religion

READ: 14-33

WRITE: answers to questions 5, 7, 10 (35-6)

Be sure you understand the problems inherent in defining religion, the history of the term as well as the various potential biases in traditional definitions

PART TWO: The World's Major Religions

This part of the course has been added in response to student interest in World Religions. Our focus will be on the five major world religions as they exist in their cultural contexts. Our readings from the section will come from *The Complete Idiot's Guide to World Religions*—no offense intended. ☺

DISCUSSION TOPIC: Hinduism Chapters in *Idiot's Guide*

optional: <http://www.religionfacts.com/hinduism/index.html>

DISCUSSION TOPIC: Buddhism Chapters *Idiot's Guide*

optional <http://www.religionfacts.com/buddhism/index.htm>

DISCUSSION TOPIC: Eastern Religion, Continued

First Test

DISCUSSION TOPIC: Judaism, Chapters in *Idiot's Guide*

optional: <http://www.religionfacts.com/judaism/index.htm>

DISCUSSION TOPIC: Judaism, Circumcision

DISCUSSION TOPIC: Christianity, Chapters in *Idiot's Guide*

DISCUSSION TOPIC: Christianity

optional: <http://www.religionfacts.com/christianity/index.htm>

DISCUSSION TOPIC: Islam, Chapters in *Idiot's Guide*

T

DISCUSSION TOPIC: Islam

optional <http://www.religionfacts.com/islam/>

Second Test

PART THREE: Comparative Study of Religion

This section of our course will explore basic comparative categories commonly found in religious traditions. We will explore these categories both in terms of the theoretical formulation of them as well as through case studies. This part of the course will culminate in your group project in which you draw on these categories to make your own religion.

An important component of this course is the goal of developing your critical thinking skills. By this we mean that you should be able to isolate the theories from the data used to illustrate the theories and understand the arguments being made by the use of those theories. In other words, you should be able to see the explanatory framework as separate from the details of the examples from religions and then apply those explanations to other examples. You will be required to demonstrate your ability to do this in the final paper you will write.

DISCUSSION TOPIC: Sacred Power

READ: 38-54

WRITE: none today

DISCUSSION TOPIC: Sacred Story: Myth

READ: 60-74

WRITE: answers to questions 1, 2, 4, 8, 9 (78)

Pay special attention to question 8 which requires you to evaluate theories of myth

DISCUSSION TOPIC: Sacred Action: Ritual

READ: 82-94, 97-98

WRITE: answers to questions 2, 3, 7, 8 (98)

Be sure you understand theories of Gaster, Smith, and Turner and Lincoln as well as the typology of ritual

DISCUSSION TOPIC: Religious Experience

READ: 127-142

WRITE: answers to questions 1, 2, 3, (152)

Be sure you understand the theories of Schleiermacher, Otto and smart

Third Test

Set Up Group Projects: DO NOT miss this class session

Organize groups of six for creating a religion project. You must be in a group to complete this project and you must complete this project to complete this class.

DISCUSSION TOPIC: The Problem of Evil

READ: 159-173

WRITE: answers to questions 2, 4, 8 (181)

Be sure you understand what the “problem of evil” is and the typology of theodicies

DISCUSSION TOPIC: Religion and Morality

READ: 186- 199

WRITE: answers to questions 1, 2 (203)

Be sure you understand the five aspects of the relationship between religion and Morality

WRITE: Bring to class a typed paragraph identifying the component of religion about which you will be writing and the theoretical model you will use to explore that component in your term paper.

DISCUSSION TOPIC: Religion and Politics

READ: 210-223

WRITE: answers to questions 1, 3, 7 (233)

Be sure you understand the five patterns of religious political engagement

DISCUSSION TOPIC: Organizations and Authority

READ: 240-242 259-268

WRITE: answers to 4 (268)

Be sure you understand Weber’s theory about the types of religious authority

Last Test

Group Project Working Session

Presentation of Group Projects