

# Religion and Violence

Sample Syllabus

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**Office Hours, M/W 11-12**

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## Course Description:

Since September 11, in seeking to ensure that the American public did not blame Islam for the violence, many commentators and scholars alike sought to argue that Islam is a peaceful religion and that violent Muslims are not “real” Muslims. This same argument is made by/for other religions.

It is based, though, in several problematic assumptions.

First, it assumes that there is such a thing as “real religion” that exists independent of its cultural expressions such that we can talk about the “true” nature of a religion in comparison to “perversions” of it;

Second it assumes that elites in the mainstream are the only ones who can say what a religion “really” is; and in a parallel, way privileges arguments constructed from snippets of sacred text as though the text is the essence of the religion.

Third it assumes that “real” religion is “good.”

This course will seek to problematize those assumptions (about Islam, but about other religions as well), and the very category “terrorism.” As an exercise in “making the strange familiar and the familiar strange,” this course will require that you seek to understand these cases through frameworks that are not your own.

We will look at studies of several different groups (Muslim, Christian, Jewish and Buddhist) that claim religious justifications for violence, attempt to understand why those examples make sense to the people involved, and then explore some theoretical perspectives aimed at explaining the underlying relationship between religion and violence.

## Books and Readings:

Bruce Lincoln, *Holy Terrors: Thinking about Religion after September 11*. Chicago University Press, 2003

All other readings will be made available in Blackboard. You must have access to these during class. You may do so with a tablet or by printing copies. Please don't try to read these on your phones. This is complex material that we need to be able to work through together.

## Course Requirements:

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, that you should have spent some time reflecting on these assignments and their significance for the issues we are discussing and that you have the reading with you to refer to.

ruing discussion. . Meaningful participation requires that you engage constructively with the ideas presented in the readings, by me, and by your fellow students.

### **Grading:**

There will be three take-home tests in this course. You may use your books and notes for your tests but you may not work together. I will expect the exams to reflect the fact that you have used these materials so there should be a level of detail (and parenthetical references to cite the sources) in your answers. Your answers are to be typed and double spaced and should explore the assigned questions thoroughly.

Students will also write a term paper on a topic of their choosing related to the course. The paper must include an analysis of an example of religiously motivated violence interpreted through one of the lenses presented in Part Two of the course. It must be descriptive and analytical of the example as a case of religious motivated violence. It must adhere to the standards required in the academic study of religion (See McCutcheon). An editorial or a position paper will not meet the requirements of this assignment.

### **Course Guidelines:**

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. The earlier I know about it the less it looks like poor planning and the more sympathetic I am likely to be. Computer problems and the like are inevitable and you should plan for them. Should extensions/make-ups be granted grades on those assignments will be significantly reduced. Please note also, that I do not accept papers 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. Violations of this policy that appear to me to be blatant may result in failure for the entire 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: Introductory Matters**

Introduction to course and to each other.  
McCutcheon handout (The Academic Study of Religion)  
Muesse handout (Heaven's Gate)

Violence in the World's Religions  
Read: Juergensmeyer and Kitts, Introduction (PDF in Blackboard)

Discuss: the essay, the problem with trying to understand religion based only on their sacred texts.

Defining Religion

Read: Lincoln, Chapter One

Defining Violence and Terrorism

Read: Juergensmeyer, Chapter 1 in *Terror in the Mind of God* (PDF in Blackboard)

## **Part Two: Ways of thinking about Religion and Violence**

Apocalypticism

Read: Wessinger, *How the Millennium Comes Violently* (PDF in Blackboard)

Cosmic War and Identity

Read: Aslan, Chapter 15 in *Oxford Handbook* (PDF in Blackboard)

Watch: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iN47VkW8\\_vI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iN47VkW8_vI)

Performance Violence

Read: Juergensmeyer, Chapter 17 in *Oxford Handbook* (PDF in Blackboard)

Evolutionary Theory

Read: Alcorta and Sosis, Chapter 38 in *Oxford Handbook* (PDF in Blackboard)

Minimalism and Maximalism

Read: Lincoln, Chapter Four

First Test: this will be a take-home, open book exam that you are to write on your own (i.e. collaborating is prohibited.) You will be expected to summarize each of the approaches above and demonstrate that you understand their basis points. Our class will not meet on this day.

## **Part Three: Case Studies in Monotheism**

Judaism

Read: Hasner and Aran, Chapter 4 in the *Oxford Handbook* (PDF in Blackboard)

Zionism

Read: Juergensmeyer, Chapter 3 in *Terror in the Mind of God* (PDF in Blackboard)

*Guest Lecture: Professor Schwam-Baird*

We will not meet as a class during our scheduled time. This session will be replaced by a film (*The Passion of the Christ*) and discussion at an evening time to be determined based on student availability. Those who cannot make our shared session outside of class time should watch the film on their own on Netflix or from another source.

Abortion Related Violence

Read: Ingersoll, Chapter 20 in *Oxford Handbook* (PDF in Blackboard)

Michael Bray, Chapter 9 in *Princeton Reader* (PDF in Blackboard)

We will not meet as a class during our scheduled time. This session will be replaced by a film (*Paradise Now*) and discussion at an evening time to be determined based on student availability. Those who cannot make our shared session outside of class time should watch the film on their own on Netflix or from another source.

Jihad and Sharia

Read: Muhammad Atta's instructions, appendix A in Lincoln

*Guest Speaker Professor Aaron Creller*

ISIS/ISIL/Islamic State

Read: Dabiq, their "journal" <http://scoopempire.com/isiss-magazine-dabiq-shockingly-legit/>

Second Test: this will be a take-home, open book exam that you are to write on your own (i.e. collaborating is prohibited.) You will be expected to summarize each of the approaches above and demonstrate that you understand their basis points. Our class will not meet on this day.

## **Part Four: Issues, Themes and Other Examples**

Workshop on paper design and proposal requirements. DO NOT MISS THIS SESSION

Buddhism

Read:

*Guest Lecture; Professor Sarah Mattice*

New Religious Movements: Heaven's Gate

Read: Zeller, Chapter 8 in *Violence and New Religious Movements* (PDF in Blackboard)

**Paper Proposals Due: please turn in a one-page double spaced proposal for your term paper including the topic, the basic argument, an indication of which theoretical approach you will use and two scholarly sources you will use.**

New Religious Movements: Jonestown

Read: Moore, Chapter 4 in *Violence and New Religious Movements* (PDF in Blackboard)

Jeremiads and Jihad

Read: Lincoln, Chapter 3

Test: this will be a take-home, open book exam that you are to write on your own (i.e. collaborating is prohibited.) You will be expected to summarize each of the approaches above and demonstrate that you understand their basis points. Our class will not meet on this day.

Peer Review Workshop, You should have what you consider to be a final version of your paper completed by this day, Do not bring a “rough draft” and expect your classmates to help you evaluate it.

Student Presentations, final term papers due