

**Department of Religious Studies
Spring 2005**

Religion 101

**INTRODUCTION TO RELIGIOUS STUDIES:
WESTERN APPROACHES TO THE PROBLEM OF EVIL**

15 Bidgood Hall, Tuesday and Thursday from 9:30 – 10:45 a.m.

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and Religious Studies
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Course Description:

The academic study of religion consists of many different sub-fields. These sub-fields are various theoretical and methodological approaches from which to study religion. No one approach gives us a complete understanding on its own, but each is necessary to build a rich and complex understanding of religion. Some of these approaches include: historical, philosophical, comparative, feminist, African-American, literary, anthropological, sociological, and psychological. They result in the sub-fields: history of religion, philosophy of religion, comparative religion, women and religion, African-American religious thought, religion and the arts, anthropology of religion, sociology of religion, and psychology of religion.

This course introduces you to Religious Studies by surveying four of these different approaches. We will look at how each addresses the problem of evil. By this broad category, I mean for us to explore understandings—often conflicting—of what constitutes wrongdoing, injustice, sin, immorality, neurosis, or oppression and what should be the response. We focus on evil in order to narrow the otherwise vast topic of religion and because evil is one of the most challenging and painful problems of human experience. How do these various sub-fields in Religious Studies explore this core issue? From their differing perspectives, what is the relation of religion to problems of good and evil? How do these approaches explain why innocent people suffer and how we should respond? In their analyses, in what ways is religion itself ever considered an "evil"?

Through readings, lectures, discussions, and assignments, the course highlights the interdisciplinary breadth of Religious Studies (one reason I majored in it!) and the field's

flexibility in exploring complex questions of value and meaning. The course focuses mainly on the Western traditions of Christianity and Judaism.

Objectives of Course:

- to introduce you to the breadth and variety of Religious Studies as an interdisciplinary field especially suited to exploration of complex issues of value and meaning. You will become acquainted with some basic vocabulary, concepts, theories, and historical developments within Religious Studies.
- to reflect in a sustained, critical, self-conscious manner on the problem of evil--long a central concern of religion--from a variety of perspectives.
- to aid you in developing your own ideas about the academic study of religion and the problem of evil through constant questioning, sound argument, careful reading, and sympathetic consideration of the arguments of others.
- to develop an appreciation of the complexity of thought and of the variety of positions and interpretive strategies in the questions the course pursues.
- generally, to further develop your analytic, critical, and imaginative skills in reading, writing, and discussion.

Questions We Will Explore:

- what are some of the different methodological and theoretical approaches adopted in the academic study of religion?
- how do these approaches explore the problem of “evil,” that is, the often conflicting understandings of what constitutes wrongdoing, injustice, sin, immorality, neurosis, or oppression and of the appropriate response?
- how do differences in the sub-fields' methods or theoretical assumptions shape differences in their explorations and conclusions?

How We Will Approach Objectives and Questions:

The course starts with an introduction and is then divided into four units, each devoted to the problem of evil investigated from a different sub-field:

- I. psychology and religion**
- II. women and religion (religion and feminism)**
- III. African-American religious thought**
- IV. religion and the arts**

Key texts are assigned for each unit. Lectures and class discussion cover the readings, background issues, and your responses, which are actively solicited in the discussions, tests, and writing assignments. These evaluations, spaced throughout the term, provide opportunities for you to further your understanding of the material and to develop your own ideas.

How You Will Be Evaluated:**Course Grade:**

- Three tests (identifications, short answers, short essays): Feb. 3, Feb. 17, April 21, worth 12.5% each.
- Two essays (3-5 pages, carefully written, double-spaced, typed): due March 24, April 14, worth 25% each.
- Attendance and participation, worth 12.5%. A good attendance record of three absences or less earns you a “B” on this part of your grade. Participation in class can raise that grade to an “A.”
- If you have more than 3 absences, you have to write the final essay (due April 29). Your course grade as calculated above will be reduced to 80% of your final grade and the final essay will count for the last 20% of your grade. If you have three absences or less, you don’t have to write the final essay.

Notes on Requirements:

- **Note again: if you have more than three absences, you have to write the final essay (due April 29). Three absences or less, and you don’t.**
- Attendance is mandatory. Our class sessions provide the understanding and material necessary for you to write the essays, so missing class will negatively affect your grade.
- Reading the assignments is mandatory and crucial since most lectures and discussion will center on these texts. The tests and essay topics are also drawn from the texts and our interpretations of them. I will distribute handouts guiding you on the reading assignments.
- Class discussions are central to how this course will proceed. Come prepared with comments and questions. Good class discussion is not a series of questions and answers between students and a professor, but is a sustained, wide-ranging yet focused, fun, collective inquiry. Participation involves *attentive listening* as well as talking. You can learn much from each other. Listen respectfully to your student colleagues; respond to their questions; build on their comments.
- Consistent attendance and effort, good class participation, and improvement over the term can all help to boost otherwise lower grades.

Other Policies:

- Academic honesty is expected of all students. All acts of dishonesty (plagiarism, cheating) in any work constitute academic misconduct. The Academic Misconduct Disciplinary Policy will be followed in the event of academic misconduct.
- If you have needs related to a disability, please contact Disabilities Services (348-4285). After initial arrangements are made with that office, I will be happy to accommodate you. If you have any other special concerns, please contact me about the situation.

Required Readings:Texts to buy at the SUPE bookstore:

Sigmund Freud, The Future of an Illusion, paperback ed., ed. and trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton).

Fyodor Dostoevsky, The Grand Inquisitor, with related chapters from The Brothers Karamazov, ed. Charles B. Guignon, trans. Constance Garnett (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1993).

Articles and Book Chapters to Download from the Religious Studies website:

<http://www.as.ua.edu/rel/rel101.html>

Carl G. Jung, Answer to Job, paperback ed., trans. by R. F. C. Hull, Bollingen Series (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), pp. ix-xv (prefatory materials), pp. 1-24 (chs. 1-2).

Valerie Saiving, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View," in WomanSpirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion, ed. Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow (HarperSanFrancisco, 1992 [1979]), pp. 25-42.

Nel Noddings, Women and Evil (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), pp. 35-58 (ch. 2).

Mary Beth Mills, "Attack of the Widow Ghosts: Gender, Death, and Modernity in Northeast Thailand," in Bewitching Women, Pious Men: Gender and Body Politics in Southeast Asia, ed. Aihwa Ong and Michael G. Peletz (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), pp. 244-73.

Other texts to be announced.

Course Schedule (topics, readings, assignments)**Course Introduction**

Jan. 6-20

5 classes

- why engage in the academic study of religion?
- what is religion?
- why do evil and suffering happen to good people? The story of Job. The problem of theodicy.
- when did evil first enter the world? Two early origin stories.

I. Psychology and Religion

Jan. 25- Feb. 17

8 classes

- religion as evil? a psychoanalytic argument that religion is a neurotic illusion: Sigmund Freud, Future of an Illusion.
- God as good and evil? a psychological exploration of the moral ambiguity of God in the Job story and the Bible: selections from Carl Jung, Answer to Job.

Unit Tests on Feb. 3 and Feb. 17**II. Women and Religion (religion and feminism)**

Feb. 22- March 17

8 classes

- what is feminism? what does it have to do with religion (women's ordination, gendered language for God, goddess spirituality, etc.)?
- re-evaluating moral evil or sin from a woman's perspective: theologian Valerie Saiving, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View."
- selections from a contemporary feminist theory of evil: Nel Noddings, Women and Evil.

- A comparative perspective from Buddhist Thailand on sexually voracious dead female spirits: Mary Beth Mills, “Attack of the Widow Ghosts.”
- March 3: Dr. Judith Plaskow, guest speaker

**Instructions for First Essay
Due Thursday, March 24**

Draw from Noddings, Saiving, Mills, Plaskow, the Biblical material, our lectures, discussion, and your own ideas to reflect on issues of women, feminism, religion, and evil. Within this broad area of reflection, develop your own argument or question to explore. Possibilities include:

- What do you learn from feminist approaches to the problem of evil and sin? Or do you find such an approach lacking and misguided?
- Does religion play a role in the association of women with evil? Alternatively, is a more subtle bias at work in which theologians have defined sin (moral evil) solely by the standards of male experience?
- Does gender-neutral or gender-inclusive language about God help avoid problems of sexism? Does it create new problems? Does it alter (for better or worse) how we think about God and female-male relations?
- Are there aspects of religion that seem derogatory or exclusionary toward women? If so, is the problem inherent to scripture and revelation or is it a problem of fallible (but redeemable) institutions and male church leaders/theologians? Is there a need for change? What change is possible?

Include references to at least two of our authors in this section (paraphrase or use short quotes from their texts).

III. African-American Religious Thought

March 22-April 7

Participation in “The African Diaspora and the Study of Religion” Conference on April 7-8
4 classes, plus the conference

- The Department of Religious Studies is organizing an international academic conference on “The African Diaspora and the Study of Religion” to be held April 7-8. The conference will examine the history, spread, and influence of African cultures and religion. This unit of the course will prepare students to attend and participate in the conference.
- Texts to be announced
- April 5: Ms. Paige McCormick, guest lecture on the African diaspora

**Instructions for Second Essay
Due Thursday, April 14**

If you attend the conference, your essay should be a 2 page report on the conference in relation to the assigned reading. If you do not attend the conference, your essay should be a 5 page paper on the reading and class discussion (more instructions to follow).

IV. Religion and the Arts (literature, film)

April 12-28

6 classes

- Great issues of human nature—such as conflicting understandings of evil and sin—are worked out not only in analytical texts, but also in artistic productions. We examine selections from literature and film to see how such ideas are explored or expressed in art.
- Trembling Before G-d, an award-winning documentary about “the hidden lives of gay and lesbian orthodox and Hasidic Jews,” screened and discussed April 12 and 14.
- Dostoevsky, The Grand Inquisitor, from The Brothers Karamavoz, test on April 21.
- Dogma, screened and discussed April 26 and 28.

Instructions for Final Essay**Due Friday, April 29 ONLY IF YOU HAVE MORE THAN THREE CLASS ABSENCES**

This essay invites you to synthesize your learning from the course as a whole and to evaluate how your thinking may have changed as a result of the course. You have three options:

- 1) Choose a work of art that strikes you as having to do with themes of religion and the problem of evil. It may be a painting, movie, popular song, hymn, poem, novel, short story, architectural monument, symphony, opera, or sculpture; in other words, any type of artistic production at all. It may be "high art" or "popular culture" art. My only other criterion is that this art must strike you as powerful, meaningful, intriguing, horrific, or beautiful. It should be something that calls forth a response from you and makes you want to think about it. Begin your essay by describing your chosen work of art. Then analyze how this piece of art represents themes relevant to religion and the problem of evil. Draw in some detail, with supporting quotes, on the theoretical perspective of at least one of the authors we've read in the course. Explain your own response: why did you choose this art and what do you make of its portrayal of the themes you are analyzing?
- 2) Alternatively, create an original artistic production that deals with themes of religion and evil. Submit both the work of art and a short essay explaining how it explores these themes.
- 3) This course has looked at the problem of evil from a variety of perspectives within Religious Studies: psychological, feminist, artistic, and African-American. Coincidentally, the movie "Dogma" sets itself much the same task, although its approach is one of comedic fantasy. The film's central action concerns two angels (Loki and Bartleby) struggling to return home to Heaven. Bartleby had questioned God's early vengeful plagues against humanity to wipe out sin, and thereby convinced Loki, the angel of death, to quit. The issues explored include the nature of evil (human, angelic, and divine); how sin should be punished; how and why sin is forgiven; and whether God is wrathful or loving in relation to sinners. "Dogma" further depicts the blackness of Jesus and the femaleness of God, among a host of other issues. Imagine that you and at least one author from our course have gathered to discuss "Dogma" (e.g., Freud, Jung, Noddings, Mills, or Saiving). What would the author(s) have to say about the movie? Be specific and use short quotes or paraphrases from the authors' texts to back up their (imagined) interpretation of the movie. Finally, stepping back from the film itself, address what you have learned from the course's various perspectives, including the artistic perspective, that helps you to understand the problem of evil in its many manifestations (personal and societal) in our world today.

APPENDIX

How To Do the Reading

One purpose of this class is to develop further your skills in critical reading or active reading. By this, I mean that you should be self-consciously reflecting on the text as you read. Reading should not be a passive exercise of passing your eyes over a page, but an active and passionate endeavour in which you cultivate your response to the reading.

I call the endeavour "passionate" because learning involves passions. Respond to the readings; get involved with them. Be attentive to how you feel as you read: confused, annoyed, excited, angry, bored, surprised, moved. Note these feelings and all questions or protests or agreements that stir inside you as you read. Ask yourself right away (and continually): why does this text make me feel this way? What do I think about this text and why?

Try to make your reading into a dialogue and debate you hold between yourself and the author. Note down your responses as you go along, either in the margins of the text or on a separate sheet of paper. Use these notes for our class discussions and as a basis for your essays.

To read actively and critically, ask yourself questions and take notes as you go along:

- what is the author's point? summarize key parts of the author's argument.
- with whom or what is the author siding? who or what is the author against?
- do you agree with the author? why or why not?
- what does this make you think of? how does this make you feel?
- what questions or confusions do you have about the text?

ALWAYS BRING YOUR TEXTS TO CLASS. Come ready to DISCUSS THE READING.

General Essay Instructions

The essays should be 3-5 pages, typed, double-spaced, in a common 12-point font. (If 3 pages, make sure your essay has sufficient depth and evidence; if 5 pages, make sure it's not rambling). To compose your essay, use your texts, class notes, class discussions, and handouts. I am looking for essays that are detailed and specific in their use of evidence to support arguments. The essays involve no outside research, but ask you to engage the authors' arguments and respond with your own. Follow the specific instructions above for each essay.

Your task is to integrate an understanding of the texts and class discussions with your own ideas, interpretations, and reflections. Thus, I am looking for essays that demonstrate understanding of the course material, as well as the development of your own ideas. Furthermore, I am looking for essays that are clear, well-organized, and well-written. To that end:

- Indicate clearly in your introduction how you are going to approach the topic and what your focus will be. Make sure your essay is structured with an introduction, development, and conclusion.
- Use specific references and examples from the texts to support your points. Avoid quoting at length from the text; instead, use short quotes or paraphrase your

- references in your own words. If you do quote, make this clear by using quotation marks. Always give the page number, either in parentheses or in a footnote.
- Be clear and concise. Write in full and correct sentences. And don't forget to proofread for grammar, spelling, and punctuation. Have a friend or a tutor at the Writing Center help.

If you want to write on a topic different from those suggested in the specific instructions above, you are welcome to do so as long as you consult with me first. You may also use various creative formats for your essays, such as an imaginary dialogue, a play scene, a courtroom trial, etc.

Grading Criteria

The following remarks give you criteria for how I grade. Note that four topics recur: presentation of ideas (your own and those of authors studied); use of evidence (how you elaborate and support ideas); design (organization, structure); and basic writing skills (grammar, mechanics, spelling, punctuation). In all cases, clarity, coherence, and conciseness are also important.

The A paper or answer is always mechanically correct and free of errors, save perhaps for one or two proofreading errors that a reader is willing to overlook because of the otherwise high quality. The reader knows exactly what the author wants to say. The ideas are clearly presented, interesting, insightful, and even original. The ideas are well supported by specific, apt examples and well-chosen quotes. The paper or answer is coherent and well-organized with a tight structure. There is no repetition or wasted words. It has style, perhaps a sense of humour. Reading it, one feels a mind at work. The reader is convinced that the writer cares about her or his ideas and about the language which conveys the ideas.

The B paper or answer has few errors in spelling, punctuation, and grammar. Some of the sentences may be awkward, but they are on the whole clear, and in them thought follows naturally on thought. The paragraphs may be unwieldy now and then, but they are organized around one main idea. The ideas are fairly clear, well-developed, and supported with evidence. The paper on the whole makes sense throughout. It does not contain unexplained digressions.

The C paper or answer may have ideas to present, but they are still quite vague and broad, or else uninteresting or obvious. It does not advance an argument that anyone might care to debate. The ideas are often not supported by specific evidence (examples, quotes, paraphrases). Even if it has clear and interesting ideas, a paper without sufficient supporting evidence may be a C paper. The C paper often has mechanical faults, errors in grammar and spelling, but note that a paper without such flaws may still be a C paper.

The D or F paper or answer is often filled with mechanical faults, errors in grammar, and errors in spelling. The paragraphs do not hold together; ideas do not develop from sentence to sentence. It usually repeats the same thoughts again and again, perhaps in slightly different language but often in the same words. It has very vague, broad, or uninteresting ideas which are not developed or supported with evidence. There is little indication that the writer understands

the material being presented. It may not be on topic and may be irrelevant to the assignment or question.