Professor: Alfredo García
Tuesdays, 2-3:15PM
Graham Center 288
Office Hours: By appointment
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Course Description

This course is an introduction to the study of religion. Several broad elements common to most of the world religions will be discussed and analyzed throughout the course. Special emphasis will be placed on the lived aspects of religious practice and social importance of the study of religion. Our main bedrock in this course, however, will be conceptions of the sacred. We will build from week to week in our analysis of world faiths, adding key terms and ideas to our understanding of religious beliefs, practices, and communities.

Required Texts

- Rent ($24.00), Buy used ($70.00), or Buy new ($92.68) on Amazon
- Available at the Green Library Reserves Desk for 2-hour loans – Call Number: BL48 .L48 1998
- You do NOT have to buy the book since it is available on reserve at the library
- Feel free to get previous editions (they are cheaper). You do NOT have to use the 6th edition.
- Fair warning: we will be reading the ENTIRE book.

All other readings will be available through Blackboard

Assessments

Instead of assessing on a percentage basis, this course will be based on a contractual understanding and pass/fail criteria. You will do all of the work that you wish to do in order to demonstrate your mastery of the material. Grades are assigned on a complete/incomplete basis, so there is no partial credit. In order to receive a passing grade for each assignment, you must turn in work that is of B quality or better. The number of quality submissions that you submit will determine what mastery level you receive.

All requirements for tier must be complete in order to receive that grade. For example, if you complete all of the assessments needed for an A grade but miss 3 classes, you will receive a B for the course. If you do not receive the minimum requirements for a D in this course, you will receive an F.
### Assessment Criteria

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Absences</th>
<th>Exams</th>
<th>Responses</th>
<th>Instagram</th>
<th>Letter</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>For an A:</strong></td>
<td>No more than 1 absence</td>
<td>75% or higher on midterm and final (cumulative)</td>
<td>8 Learning supplements</td>
<td>5 Instagram posts</td>
<td>Religious Site Visit and Write-up</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>For a B:</strong></td>
<td>No more than 2 absences</td>
<td>75% or higher on midterm and final (cumulative)</td>
<td>7 Learning supplements</td>
<td>5 Instagram posts</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>For a C:</strong></td>
<td>No more than 3 absences</td>
<td>75% or higher on midterm and final (cumulative)</td>
<td>6 Learning supplements</td>
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<td><strong>For a D:</strong></td>
<td>No more than 4 absences</td>
<td>75% or higher on midterm and final (cumulative)</td>
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In order to account for issues that may arise during the semester, each student will be given 2 tokens that they can use to replace certain assignments. Each token can replace:
- 1 absence
- 1 response essay
- 1 Instagram picture
- 10% bonus points on an exam

There are no make-up exams and/or assignments, there is no grading curve, and there is no extra credit. Late materials will not be accepted.

The assignments for this course are designed around my four goals for the course:
1. For you to **learn** the basic terms and ideas of religion.
2. For you to **apply** your new knowledge to real-world issues.
3. For you to **expand** your religious knowledge to the world around you.
4. For you to use all of this to **act** in the world in a new and knowledgeable way.

**Learn**

**Midterm and Final Exams:** The exams will be comprised of a combination of multiple choice, true/false, and essay questions designed to assess the materials discussed in class up to that point. The midterm will be an open-book exam taken at home, and you will have 3 hours to finish the exam and return your answers to me. The final exam will be taken in class during the appropriate finals time slot. More information will be provided closer to exam time. **Deadlines:** The open-book, take-home midterm exam is due by Sunday, October 16, 11:59PM. The final exam will be a closed-book, in-house exam on our finals exam day TBD.

**Apply**

**Learning Supplements:** How does our knowledge relate to the real world? Each week will have a series of assignments that you can choose to reflect on and write about. These tasks will have you consider articles from current events, listen to podcasts, look up basic facts, and will require you to synthesize the information learned in class so that you can apply it to real-world issues. I will ask students to present
from their response essays during the next week’s class. Each learning supplement is meant to be cumulative. You can turn in the supplements as many times as you’d like in order to receive a passing grade, but you can only do so up to the deadline for that particular assignment. **Deadline:** Every response essay is due on the Sunday night after class at 11:59PM.

**Expand**

**Instagram Posts:** What about religion in your everyday life? Using your new view of the world, this assignment requires that you document aspects of religion from your own life through Instagram. Five (5) photos throughout the semester are required for this assignment. More information will be given separately. **Deadlines:** At least two (2) Instagram posts must be posted before the midterm exam. The final three (3) posts are due by Sunday, November 27, 11:59PM.

**Act**

**Religious Site Visit and Write-up:** No course on religion can be complete without the actual interaction with religious people, organizations, and communities. For this assignment, your task is to go to a religious place of worship. There are two ways to fulfill this requirement. If you attend one of the visits that I have planned into the schedule and stay for at least an hour, then you will receive full credit for this assignment. If you choose to go to a religious site on your own, you must document the experience in a full site visit report. More information will be given separately. **Deadline:** Site visit write-ups are due by Sunday, December 4, 11:59PM.

**Participation and Attendance Policy**

Attendance and participation is a sizeable portion of your grade. You are expected to have read all of the week’s materials prior to coming to class and must arrive prepared to discuss all of the readings and give your own input on the topics. Class time will be a mix of lecture, activities, and discussion, so be prepared to talk about the materials that have been assigned for class. We meet only once a week, so make sure to dedicate time throughout the week to do the readings. DO NOT leave it for the night before class; you will hate yourself.

By taking this class, you are making a commitment to attend lectures, arrive on time, and leave only when class is fully finished.

Technology is now ubiquitous and is an integral part of social interaction today. The dings, vibrations, and boinks of cell phones, tablets, and computers, however, are highly distracting for class discussions and lectures. As a result, you must turn off and put away your cell phone and computers upon entering the classroom. Laptops will not be allowed during class. Make sure to bring plenty of paper and writing utensils for class notes and activities.

It is my legal right to prohibit any kind of recording of this class, and I exercise that right. Therefore, recording devices of any kind, audio or video, are prohibited in this class. Violating this policy is illegal, and violators will be sanctioned.

**Student Code of Standards**

As a member of the University community, I expect that all students will follow the student code of standards as put forth by the university:

- Respect the tradition of academic inquiry, the University’s rules of conduct, and its mission.
• Respect the opinions and differences of all members of the FIU community.
• Practice civility and demonstrate conduct that reflects the values of the institution.
• Respect the rights and property of the University and its members.
• Be diligent and honest in your personal and academic endeavors.

We will be discussing difficult and controversial topics in this course. As a result, it is imperative that all students uphold all of the elements of this code of standards. I reserve the right to dismiss any student that is in violation of these points.

oVote

I will be polling students at various points in the semester using a new phone app called oVote. These surveys are meant to contribute to our discussion and should not be treated as quizzes. They do, however, form part of your participation grade and will be an essential component to the class. For every two surveys that you fail to answer, I will mark you absent for one day of class.

Active Learning Strategies

This course will engage students through controversial/ethical discussion topics, case studies, class discussions, out-of-class assignments, and group work. The course is heavy on the reading in the front end so as to provide basic tools for our discussions later in the course. As a result of the active learning methods that will be employed during class time, it is imperative that you read all materials before attending class. Although I will be lecturing every week for some portion of the time, I will not be covering every detail of the readings. The task is for you to come to class prepared to learn beyond the textbook.

Email Policy

I am very prompt with responding to emails, but it is important that we all maintain a level of respect for each other regarding expectations for replies and emails. I refuse to answer any emails between 9PM-10AM each day. Please keep this in mind as you study for your exams and write your assignments. Most students leave questions until the last minute: do not let this happen to you.

Center for Academic Success

The Center for Academic Success is available on both campuses to support you. They provide personalized attention tailored to your needs in a user-friendly environment that includes online support. You can get help writing a paper, reading more efficiently and increasing textbook comprehension, or even creating an individualized learning plan. The center is located in the Green Library 120 at MMC and in AC1 160 at BBC. Find them online at http://undergrad.fiu.edu/cas/learning-center/.

Disability Clause

Students with disabilities, as defined by law, have the right to receive needed accommodation if their disabilities make it difficult to perform academic tasks in the usual way or in the allotted time frame. In order to receive accommodation, however, students must register with the Disability Resource Center in GC 190 at MMC and WUC 131 at BBC. It is your responsibility to let me know if you have a disability within the first two weeks of class.
LEARNING SCHEDULE

Week 1: Aug 23 - Introduction to the Course

No readings assigned for this class.

MANDATORY: Visit the “How to Recognize Plagiarism” page from the Indiana University Bloomington’s School of Education and take the certification test: https://www.indiana.edu/~istd/sitemap.html
- You must email me your certificate of completion by Sunday, August 28, 11:59PM.

Week 2: Aug 30 - Understanding “religion” through case study: Scientology

So what is “religion,” anyway? Although defining religion may seem like a worthless venture—one of those questions that just ends with frustration and annoyance—it is actually a very important question for matters of law, taxes, and social policy. Government agencies must contend with this question quite often as they pursue their various goals. The First Amendment of the Constitution is often listed as the go-to source for matters of religious freedom and establishment, but the First Amendment is incredibly short and vague. It takes a serious consideration of practice, belief, and community to get at the heart of whether or not something is a religion. This week, we will examine one of the most famous cases of the adjudication of religion: that of the Church of Scientology. We will examine the details on Scientology and then ascertain what elements you see as being important for the adjudication of religion.


- Only read Pp. 89-110.


Learning Supplement: So is Scientology a religion? You tell me. Due by Sunday, September 4, 11:59PM.

Week 3: Sept 6 - Religion as Cosmic Ordering

One way of viewing religion is as an element of culture, a perspective most famously posed by Peter Berger. Culture, in his view, is a way of ordering chaos in the universe. Religion, as an element of culture, is one of the most powerful ways in which humans order the chaos of life. We will explore this idea of the “nomizing” force of religion in depth before we consider the ways in which scholars of religion approach the study of religious activity worldwide. Our goal will be to discover how the different methodologies of religion scholars ultimately reach different conclusions and perspectives.


Learning Supplement: The Blind Men and the Elephant. Due by Sunday, September 11, 11:59PM.

Week 4: Sept 13 - NO CLASS

Class is cancelled for this week. Enjoy the day off!

Week 5: Sept 20 - Our first building block: Sacredness

What makes something “sacred?” And how do we know something is sacred when we see it? This week we will begin our analysis of this idea of the sacred, the holy, the special. It is often the case that we link concepts of sacrality with those of religion. Sacredness, indeed, is often seen as the foundational element in religiousness. It is important, then, to consider this term in depth and to delve into the complexities of sacredness. For this week, we will draw from one of the most famous intellectuals on the concept of the sacred: Mircea Eliade. Sacredness was, for him, imbued throughout the world in ever-shifting and ever-growing ways. There is a quality to sacredness that is very much like that of the roots of a tree: it grips the earth and marks a spot that is immovable. We will consider his ideas alongside our readings from Livingston’s textbook


Learning Supplement: DIY Constructing the Sacred. Due by Sunday, September 18, 11:59PM.

Week 6: Sept 27 - Sacred Ritual and Practice

Billions of people participate in religious rituals and practice on a daily basis worldwide. Whether it is praying before going to bed or making a pilgrimage to Mecca, keeping the Sabbath or keeping a candle burning, religious practice is widespread across the globe and forms a bedrock of the religious experience. This week, we will consider sacred ritual and practice and consider the power that these actions can have for practitioners of religions worldwide. Why do we put so much time and effort into our religious practices? Why are they important? In addition to our chapter from Livingston’s textbook,
we will read one chapter from Tom Tweed’s famous book on La Hermita: a famous shrine for exiled Cubans worldwide right here in Miami. His emphasis is on the “transtemporal” and “translocative” power of religious rituals. We will consider these elements in depth this week.


Learning Supplement: The FBI and religious practice. Due by Sunday, October 2, 11:59PM.

Week 7: Oct 4 - Sacred Scripture

Bibles. Korans. Sutras. Some of them are written up like magazines. Others are drafted as graphic novels. And still others are clothed, adorned, and put to rest at the end of each day. The wealth of sacred scriptures is vast and there is a great variety in the ways in which people interact and interpret these sacred scriptures. For this week, our task is to consider the importance of the written word in questions of religion and religiosity. Why are these texts so important? What do they contain? And who gets to interpret them? We will be focusing in particular on this last question: that of interpretation. As you have probably seen in your own life, there is a variety of ways to interpret sacred scriptures. Some are read as exhortations for violence. Others are seen as supportive of homosexuality. And still others are seen as historical fact and scientific evidence. We will consider all of these factors in this week’s class.


- You may want to watch this short YouTube video about Sikhism before doing this reading: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BNh7QNRUVp0.

Learning Supplement: Burning Korans. Due by Sunday, October 9, 11:59PM.

Week 8: Oct 11 - Deity, Deities, and the Nature of Theism

It is interesting to note that we have gotten up to this point in the semester—about midway through our course—without really touching on matters related to deities and/or other spiritual beings. In the United States, where the Abrahamic religions are more widespread, we typically assign a great value to having a deity or the worshipping of a deity as part of religious worship and practice. But that is often not the case when we consider other religions across the globe. This week, we will analyze the nature of theism and the myriad of options related to theism: non-theism, pantheism, polytheism, monotheism,
etc. We will place a special emphasis on the interaction between humans and non-human agents (such as deities).


No Learning Supplement this week. Study hard for your midterm!

Sun, Oct 16 – Midterm Due, 11:59PM

Week 9: Oct 18 - Where it all began: Cosmogony and Origins

Where did we all come from? How did it all begin? Religious traditions far and wide display a plethora of origin myths and stories that seek to answer those central questions regarding the beginning of life and the creation of the universe. Many of us have heard the classic opening lines of the Old Testament, “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the Earth,” but there are other origin myths that detail different narratives of how it all began: stories of divine warfare, of trial and error, of female creating deities and male creating deities. This week, we will consider origin myths in particular and will ask ourselves why they matter so much. What is so significant about those first days?


Learning Supplement: Why is evolution via natural selection so controversial? Due by Sunday, October 23, 11:59PM.

Week 10: Oct 25 - The Human Problem, Theodicy, and Evil

According to Peter Berger (back in the beginning of this course), the problems of pain, suffering, evil, and death are central to all religions. Religions, he says, work incredibly hard to counteract the chaos, noise, and disorder caused by all the bad and evil things that happen in the world. And although his theory may provide a scaffold for understanding religious approaches to suffering, it does not tell the whole story. This week, we will consider how religions approach these problems in their own theological pursuits. We will compare and contrast different approaches to the problem of pain in an effort to identify how different religious traditions contextualize the problem and give indications on how to overcome it.

Week 11: Nov 1 - Religious Ethics

What is right, and what is wrong? We all face ethical challenges in our daily lives: decisions that leave us unsure as to what is the appropriate course of action. From small questions—like whether or not you should give a homeless woman some money—to larger questions—like whether you should take a family member off of life support—we are all challenged with difficult decisions that involve issues of right and wrong, good and bad. Many of us draw from religious teachings or religious underpinnings for understanding questions of ethical importance. This week, we will examine these religious underpinnings in depth and will consider whether there is the possibility of having ethical and moral structures without religious underpinnings.


Learning Supplement: Can we be good without god? Due by Sunday, November 6, 11:59PM.

Week 12: Nov 8 - Leaving This World, Leaving All Worlds

Although we have considered how religious traditions indicate how to live within the world, there are still a substantial number of indications from religious traditions about how to renounce this world and reach a higher, more ultimate, state of being. Although we commonly hear the term, “salvation,” the ultimate renunciation of this world can come in a variety of forms. Some of these states come after death, others can be reached during life, and still others requires millions of lives before they are embodied. This week, we will consider the myriad of approaches to overcoming this-worldly states and the many pursuits for ultimate union with the divine.


Learning Supplement: The Whirling Dervishes. Due by Sunday, November 13, 11:59PM.

Week 13: Nov 15 - Secularization and Fundamentalism

The term “secularization” is often used in academic literature and public press, yet those who use the term rarely acknowledge the nature of the term today and the complex history that the term has. Is
secularization the complete absence of religion? What do people mean when they talk about a secular society? This week, we will consider what secularization is, how it has been interpreted, and how efforts at the creation and maintenance of secularization has led to the rise of new religious movements and fundamentalist organizations. We will consider the question as to whether the emphasis on a secular sphere may have the unintended consequences of igniting more, rather than less, religious fervor.


Learning Supplement: Cosmic Warfare and Terrorism. Due by Sunday, November 20, 11:59PM.

Week 14: Nov 22 - Contemporary Challenges

As we wrap up the course, we consider several of the contemporary challenges related to religions worldwide. We will focus in particular on questions of religion and the state. To what extend do governments have to contend with the religious life of its citizens? How do religion and politics mix? We will bring all of our tools from the entire semester to this discussion and will ask ourselves how a more nuanced understanding of religious life and practice yields a more holistic understanding of the challenges that we face today.


No Learning Supplement this week. Enjoy your Thanksgiving weekend with your friends and family!

Week 15: Nov 29 – Wrapping Up, Review Session, and Final Words

All good things must come to an end =(

Final Exam – Date TBD