

REL 2011
Introduction to Religion
Spring 2024
Tuesday-Thursday 12:30-1:45

Professor: Aleksandra Restifo

Office hours (in person/on Zoom): by appointment

Course Description

What is religion? Why should we study religion? Why does it matter how we study religion? How does culture shape religion? How does religion shape culture? What theoretical methods can we employ to improve our understanding of how religion affects our life?

Religion is central to human life. It is also part of the broader cultural context defined by our values and views on magic, science, secularism, violence, gender, sexuality, race, and popular culture. In this course, we will examine our own preconceptions about religion and explore how religion has been variously studied and understood from the psychological, sociological, historical, and postcolonial perspectives, among others. In the first half of the course, we will discuss some of the works by thinkers from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and in the second half of the course, we will turn to more recent models of the relationship between religion, ethics, and culture. Throughout the course, we will use case studies from various religious traditions, including Hinduism, Christianity, and Buddhism.

Objectives of the Course

1. Develop a working knowledge of key theories in the study of religion
2. Learn to engage critically with thinkers and scholars of religion from the past and present
3. Demonstrate an awareness of the complexity of the history of religion
4. Identify main arguments in theoretical works and their ethical implications

Global Learning Outcomes

1. Students will be able to gather, evaluate, and analyze information
2. Students will be able to examine various phenomena from multiple perspectives
3. Students will express ideas in a clear and comprehensive manner
4. Students will be able to employ analytical writing and research skills in a variety of contexts

Grading

Attendance and participation	10%
5 blogs (500 words)	30%
Site visit essay (1200 words)	30%
Final collaborative project	30%

Blogs (500 words)

You will post five blogs to questions pertaining to the topics of the course and comment on at least two other blogs of your peers. The goal of this writing exercise is to urge you to reflect on questions under discussion.

Site visit essay (1200 words)

This is your midterm essay. You will perform field research by attending a religious service outside of your own religious tradition. The goal is to provide you with an opportunity to immerse in an unfamiliar religious context.

Final collaborative project

For this project, you will split into teams to collaboratively design your own religious tradition. You will need to write a description that accounts for the common aspects of religion, such as myth, ritual, sacred texts, divinities/prophets/enlightened beings, paths to liberation, views on righteousness and sin, and interpretations of gender, violence, and purity. You will submit a draft of your project in week 14 and the final project is due for submission on Canvas in week 16. You will present your projects in class in the final week.

Statement of Academic Integrity

Academic integrity is essential for both teaching and learning. All students must conform to the highest standards of academic honesty. You are required to be aware of proper citation practices and present only your original work. Be sure to read about the citing regulations here <https://library.fiu.edu/infolit/citations>, and consult me, should you have any doubts or hesitations about the ways of referencing or employing other sources (books, articles, conversations, discussions, pictures, etc.). Any form of cheating will be taken seriously.

Required Texts

Hedges, Paul, *Understanding Religion: Theories and Methods for Studying Religiously Diverse Societies*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2021.

All other readings will be available on Canvas.

Course Schedule

Week 1: What is Religion?

Week 2. History of “religion”

Week 3. Magic, Religion, and Science

Week 4. Religion and Society

Week 5. Religion and Experience

Week 6. Illusion and Imagination

Week 7. Ritual and Danger

Week 8. Purity and Power

Week 9. Religion and Secularism

Week 10. Colonialism and Violence

Week 11. Pluralism and Religious Engagement

Week 12. Religion and Gender

Week 13. Caste and Race

Week 14. New Religious Movements

Week 15. Religion and Bodies

Week 16. Final Project Presentations