

**RLG 6013 Modern Analysis of Religion**  
**Mondays 10:00-12:45 (EST)**  
**Location: Chem & Physics 103**  
**Fall 2024**

Instructor: Sasha Restifo  
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Office hours: Monday 1-2pm, and by appointment

### **Course Description**

“Our socialization is our humanization, and religion is the primary social form by which our socialization takes place.”

(Kathryn Lofton on Durkheim, *Consuming Religion* 2017, 18).

Religion plays a key role in human experience, influencing every aspect of our lives—from relationships and norms of behavior to political views. Our religious beliefs and practices are contingent upon our conceptions of who we are and how we relate to others. As Jay Garfield (2022, 155) observes, “we are hence constructed as persons both by our intentional, conscious participation in social structures and by our tacit participation in them; that construction includes both attitudes and roles of which we are explicitly aware and those that may be merely implicit.” The study of religion, as one of these social structures, involves examining human subjectivity and agency. By exploring themes of personhood, affect, (non)violence, ritual, and embodiment across religious traditions, this course aims to build upon our personal experiences of religion and create space for critical reflection on how religion impacts human lives.

This course follows a seminar-style format and introduces graduate students to the various methods and theories used in the study of religion. Throughout the course, we will explore questions such as: What is "religion"? Why is it important to study religion? How does religion shape our views on culture and the self? The course will incorporate theoretical tools from postcolonial, ritual, gender, and material studies, and engage with non-Western philosophies and literatures. These topics will be explored through in-depth discussions and the analysis of case studies.

### **Modality**

This is a seminar-style course, which means that you are expected to come to class having read all the assigned readings and be prepared to engage in meaningful conversations. Prior to each class, you will post a short reflection (about 300 words) on the readings to Canvas. Your reflection should include at least one question pertaining to the reading, which you will read/summarize for the rest of the class during our discussion. Starting from week three, you will

be required to sign up as a discussion leader for one or more sessions. This is an in-person class with occasional zoom sessions.

## Course Goal

The primary objective of this course is to broaden our perspective on religion, using it as a pathway to better understand the complexities of our contemporary world. Through an exploration of key theories in the study of religion, the course aims to equip students with the knowledge and critical thinking tools necessary to engage in well-informed discussions about religion and the history of religious studies.

## Learning Outcomes

Through critical analysis and thoughtful exploration, students will develop the capacity to articulate their ideas about religion and culture in a clear and informed manner. Additionally, students will gain a deeper understanding of the diverse perspectives and realities that shape our lives today.

## Artificial Intelligence Policy

ChatGPT, one of the most popular AI text generators, can be helpful in providing a broad overview of a topic, but it has a number of limitations:

- It cannot develop a researched argument paper that requires academic sources;
- It cannot write *in-depth* about a topic in a factually accurate manner;
- It cannot cite academic sources (it invents both citations and sources).

I encourage you to use AI tools as a way of learning, not as a replacement for your own critical thinking and writing. When utilizing AI, it's essential to include a short paragraph at the end of your assignment that explains how you used the artificial intelligence tool and why. For example, you can say: "I asked ChatGPT to give me other examples of religious intolerance which improved my understanding of the material." Texts written by artificial intelligence text generators are detectable with software.

## Requirements

### Attendance (25%)

This is a discussion-based course, the success of which is contingent upon your regular attendance. Research shows that the most effective learning, in terms of outcomes and satisfaction, occurs in a group setting through collaborative work. Together, we will learn from and with each other.

“One of the key elements of learning is the social component. There are many theories that review and analyse it, and, no matter the focus, they all agree that *social interactions*

*and socially constructed meanings are key to learning. People learn from and with others, they build on each other's experiences and understanding, they construct shared meaning... According to research results, when people learn collaboratively in small groups, they learn more, remember the information better and longer, and are more satisfied with the learning process.”<sup>1</sup>*

### **Weekly reflection (25%)**

Each week, you will post a short reflection (about 300 words) on the reading to Canvas, which

- should contain at least one question for a class discussion
- you will summarize/read out during the class

Reflections will need to be posted before the class and will help you organize your thoughts and ideas about the reading material.

### **Paper proposal (25%)**

For a midterm assignment, you will write a paper proposal (about 1000 words) on a topic of your choice. Your paper proposal should include:

- a clear argument
- evidence/illustrations to support the argument
- references to at least three academic sources
- at least six direct quotes (of varied length) from academic sources

I encourage you to start thinking about an idea for your writing project from the first weeks of the course. We will discuss your projects together in class during the last week of September.

### **Final paper presentation (25%)**

For your final paper, you will expand your proposal into a longer paper (up to 3000 words) and present it in the final weeks of the course. Your paper should include:

- a clear argument
- evidence/illustrations to support the argument
- references to at least four academic sources
- at least six direct quotes (of varied length) from academic sources

You will prepare a PowerPoint presentation to accompany the delivery of your paper and allow for questions and/or feedback from your peers. You can then incorporate this feedback into your final draft of the paper, which is due during our scheduled finals time.

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<sup>1</sup> International Training Center on learning, <https://www.itcilo.org/social-aspect-learning>

## Grading Scale

A	96-100	C+	76-79
A-	90-95	C	70-75
B+	87-89	D	60-69
B	83-86	F	59 and below
B-	80-82		

## 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 Michael. *Understanding Religion: Theories and Methods for Studying Religiously Diverse Societies* (University of California Press, 2021).

## Web Resources

1. FIU library website: <https://library.fiu.edu/>
2. A guide for writing a research paper in the Humanities:  
[https://poorvucenter.yale.edu/sites/default/files/files/LPaul\\_Humanities.pdf](https://poorvucenter.yale.edu/sites/default/files/files/LPaul_Humanities.pdf)
3. Chicago-style citation and bibliography guide:  
[https://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools\\_citationguide.html](https://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide.html)
4. A digital library of academic sources: <https://www.jstor.org/> (login through FIU to get free access)
5. A digital library of academic sources that allows to download or borrow materials:  
<https://archive.org/>

## Schedule

(subject to change)

**Week 1, August 26: What is “Religion”?**

**Week 2, September 2:** Labor Day, no class

### **Week 3, September 9: What is Religion?**

- Paul Hedges, *Understanding Religion* (2021), Introduction & chapter 2
- Jonathan Z. Smith, “Religion, Religions, Religious”
- Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912), 1-47

### **Week 4, September 16: History of “Religion”**

- Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions* (2005), Introduction through chapter 3

### **Week 5, September 23: Decolonial Studies**

- Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity* (2011), 1-26, 77-117, 283-336

### **Week 6, September 30: Religion and the Self**

#### **Discussion of paper proposals**

- Garfield, *Losing Ourselves* (2022), 28-66, 117-172

### **Week 7, October 7: Religion and (Non)violence**

- *Bhagavad Gītā*, chapters 2 and 4
- *Gandhi’s Gītā*, chapters 2 and 4
- A. Loomba, “The Violence of Gandhi’s Non-Violence” (2014)

### **Week 8, October 14: Religion and Nonviolence**

#### **Paper proposals due**

- The Story of Yaśodhara from the *Bṛhat-kalpa-bhāṣya*
- Colette Caillat, "Fasting unto Death According to the Jaina Tradition" (1977)
- Selections from Phyllis Granoff, *The Forest of Thieves*

### **Week 9, October 21: Ritual Studies**

- Hedges, chapter 12
- Mary Douglas, selections from *Purity and Danger*, in Bloesch and Minister, “The Bounds of Hierarchy,” 15-25
- Lucinda Ramberg, *Given to the Goddess: South Indian Devadasis and the Sexuality of Religion* (2014), Introduction & chapter 2

### **Week 10, October 28: Religion and Affect**

- William James, “What is Emotion?” (1884)
- Sara Ahmed, “Affective Economies” (2004)
- Selections from Maria Heim’s *Words for the Heart* (2022)

### **Week 11, November 4: Religion and Gender**

- Hedges, chapter 10
- Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (1990), 189-193
- Daniel Boyarin, "Feminization and Its Discontents: Torah Study as a System for the Domination of Women" (2009)
- James Dobson, "Bringing up Boys" (2014)

### **Week 12, November 11: Veterans Day, no class**

### **Week 13, November 18: Religion and Bodies**

- Hedges, chapter 9
- Saba Mahmood, "Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival" (2013)
- Bharat Ranganathan, "Mahmood, Liberalism, and Agency" (2016)

### **Week 14, November 25: Religion and Secularism (via zoom)**

- Hedges, chapter 16
- Saba Mahmood, "Religious Reason and Secular Affect: An Incommensurable Divide?"
- Selections from Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* (2007)
- Rajeev Bhargava, "Reimagining Secularism: Respect, Domination and Principled Distance" (2013)

### **Week 15, December 2-9: Paper Presentations**

**Final papers due**