

## **TR 771 Approaches to the Study of Religion and Religious Communities**

United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities  
Spring 2010, Tuesday 6:00 pm

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Office Hours: You are welcome to stop by my office whenever the door is open, or email to set up an appointment.

### **Course Description**

This course introduces students to major approaches to the study of religion as a human phenomenon, and to analytical methods for studying religious practices and communities. Specifically, we will explore different theories of religion, and different analytic components of religion and religious communities. We will also do a limited study of a religious practice within an ethnic community and religious tradition that is different from one's own.

### **Course Objectives**

1. To become familiar with some key language, concepts and theories of the academic study of religion.
2. To become familiar with some analytic and comparative components of the academic study of religion.
3. To give evidence of the ability to use the basic language and concepts in the study of theories of religion and in the study of comparative concepts in religion.
4. To study a religious community or religious practice or to formulate a workable thesis proposal in the study of religion.

### **Course texts:**

Textbooks (available for purchase):

1. Berger, Peter. The Sacred Canopy (Anchor).
2. George D. Chryssides and Ron Geaves, The Study of Religion (Continuum).
3. Vincent J. Miller, Consuming Religion (Continuum).

Supplementary texts (on reserve):

1. James, William. The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy (Dover, 1956) ("WTB").

Other resources:

1. Film "Agnes of God" (on reserve)
2. Film "Eve and the Fire Horse"

## Course Requirements

1. Regular and punctual attendance in class, timely reading, and thoughtful participation in class discussions. More than two unexcused absences will result in the lowering of your grade (one grade level per absence).
2. A 2-3 page essay, “What is Religion?” components which are set out in Appendix I. 20% of final grade.
3. A 5-6 page seminar paper, focusing in depth on a topic or theorist of religion. Details in Appendix I. 30% of final grade.
4. Final paper/project: A (group) course project in studying a religious community, details also in Appendix I, **or** a detailed M.A. thesis proposal **or** a research paper on a topic in religious studies. 50% of final grade

## General Class Structure

The class will be a blend of discussion and lecture.

## Course Policies

1. Please treat this course, your instructor, and your fellow students with respect by attending class and participating thoughtfully in the discussions. In fact, attendance and participation in class are required to pass this course. More than two unexcused absences will result in a penalty of one grade level per absence. Coming to class late or leaving early may count as an absence.
2. All papers are to be double-spaced, and typewritten, with appropriate citation format, namely, Turabian 7<sup>th</sup> edition (or most recent). I will not accept emailed papers, but you may fax papers to me at 651-633-4315. Papers are due at the beginning of the class for which they are assigned.
3. All work submitted must be your own, and done specifically for this course.
4. Please see the seminary-wide policies on academic integrity, inclusive language, and sexual harassment, articulated in the student handbook.
5. The current UTS policy on extensions is as follows:  
The work for a course is terminated at the end of the final class session. The performance in the course is evaluated on the basis of the work submitted by that time, unless an exception is made by the instructor, in which case an extension must be agreed to by the instructor by the end of the final class session and the student must complete a formal petition to be submitted in lieu of a grade. If the student is unable to negotiate the extension by the end of the final class session due to critical health issues, the student is responsible for seeing that the professor is notified as soon as possible, and then negotiating the extension promptly.

## Course Schedule:

<i>Week</i>	<i>Subject</i>	<i>Reading</i>
1. 2.9.10	Introduction Syllabus See Agnes of God	

2.	2.16.10	No class	
3.	2.23.10	Religion as a human construct	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Chryssides and Geaves, Introduction to ch. 2</li> </ul>
4.	3.2.10	Religion as a social construct	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Berger chs. 1-4</li> </ul>
5.	3.9.10	Religion as a psychological construct Due: What is Religion?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• James, "Will to Believe," "Is Life Worth Living," "Sentiment of Rationality"</li> </ul>
6.	3.16.10	Dimensions of the study of religion Seminar paper	Chryssides and Geaves, chs. 6-7
	3.23.10	Reading Week	
7.	3.30.10	Field studies and Gender See Eve and the Fire Horse	Chryssides and Geaves, chs. 8, 10
	4.6.10	Easter Monday -- no class	
8.	4.13.10	No class -- attend multicultural lectures on April 12 and 13.	
9.	4.20.10	Religion and culture Seminar paper	Miller, Introduction to ch. 2
10.	4.27.10	Religion and culture Seminar paper	Miller, chs. 3, 5, 6.
11.	5.4.10	Student presentation	
12.	5.11.10	Student presentation	
13.	5.18.10	Wrap up Final paper/project due	

## Written Assignments and Group Project

### *Essay: What is Religion?*

A 2-3 page essay. Start with a thesis statement, in this case either your definition of religion, or a statement that religion cannot be defined. Support your thesis statement, drawing from the assigned readings.

### *Seminar paper:*

A 5-6 page paper on a specific author or topic, to be determined in class. Again, start with a thesis you want to discuss in class. (E.g. Karl Marx offers a persuasive argument as to the function of religion in society). Support your thesis with reference to the text. Anticipate arguments against your thesis and rebut them. End with some questions for discussion, introducing these questions with why these are important issues.

### *Group Project and Field Research<sup>1</sup>*

You will focus on an unfamiliar ethnic community in the Twin Cities, with a religious tradition that is not your own.

The project consists of the following parts:

1. Library research into the beliefs, ethics, and ritual practices of this community;
2. Observation of a religious ritual in the tradition of this community;
3. At least one interview with a minister or other religious leader of this community regarding:
  - a. Religious beliefs, ethics, and rituals
  - b. How they are related to each other and how they may have changed or adapted over time and place
4. (Optional for extra credit) Four hours of community service (not proselytizing) in this community.
5. A written field research report that includes:
  - a. A research paper outlining the religious beliefs, ethics and rituals of the community.
  - b. A descriptive analysis\* of the religious ritual you observed
  - c. A transcript of the interview with the religious leader
  - d. If you choose to do the community service, a written journal with reflection on how this community service reflected or countered the community's religious beliefs and ethics.
6. A presentation
  - a. An account of the community's history in the Twin Cities

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Sheila E. McGinn, "Integrating Field Research in the Introductory Religion Course," in Spotlight on Teaching, vol. 19, no. 4 (American Academy of Religion, October 2004).

- b. A basic survey of the religious tradition (beliefs, ethics, rituals) of this community
- c. A demonstration or description of the ritual you visited
- d. A presentation of your descriptive analysis\* of the religious ritual you observed, and how this conveys and reinforces the beliefs and values of the community

\*Descriptive analysis of the ritual and sacred space of the religious community:

1. Observation
  - a. Describe background – who, what, when, where, etc. Take pictures and/or record sounds if possible.
  - b. During event (only if possible) and immediately after, write down everything you think might be relevant.
    - i. Architecture
    - ii. Physical setting, e.g. colors, furniture, art
    - iii. Leaders and participants (dress, sex, etc.)
    - iv. Sequence of ritual actions
    - v. What the ritual means to the religious community
    - vi. Anything else important
2. Analysis
  - a. Outline the basic ritual process.
  - b. What actions, persons, places and things seemed to you to be most important?
  - c. What actions, persons, places and things seemed to be least important? Did the participants agree? Did you and your colleagues agree?
  - d. What connections do you see between specific verbal and ritual moments in the event?
  - e. What connections do you see among the various ritual actions?
3. Reflection
  - a. What signs and symbols can you identify?
  - b. What do these signs and symbols mean?
  - c. Can you identify the kind of ritual this is?
  - d. What does this ritual teach specifically? How might your reflection compare with the participants' meanings?
  - e. How does this ritual convey the meaning of life to its participants? What meaning does it convey? How might your reflection compare with the participants' meanings? Incorporate course texts if possible.
  - f. Did you, as an observer, find this ritual meaningful? Why or why not? What did this ritual teach you about your own beliefs?
4. Evaluation of experience
  - a. Do you feel that, as a group, you achieved your objectives?
  - b. How could the research process have been improved?
  - c. What are some possible avenues for further research or discussion?