

RELIGION 270
RELIGION AND THE ARTS

BULLETIN INFORMATION

RELG 270 – Religion and the Arts (3 credit hrs)

Course Description:

Literary, visual, and/or performance art associated with religious discourse and practice.

SAMPLE COURSE OVERVIEW

This course offers a critical approach to the interpretation of works of literary, visual, and performance art that intersects with religious discourse and practice. The course begins with an introduction to some of the main issues related to the academic study of religion, with emphasis upon the ways that certain interpretive practices have impacted the development and use of texts, images, and ritualized performances. We will first address the history, composition, and style of texts claimed to be sacred. Students will read texts from a variety of religious traditions and discuss how, why, and to what end the association of texts with divine or otherwise supernatural agency functions to authorize and legitimate certain interpretations. Students will then view and discuss the significance of devotional images and other styles of seen objects. They will consider the historical and social conditions under which particular images and objects have been invested with various meanings, and how these meanings shape, reflect, and contest different kinds of aesthetic tastes and interpretive methods. After this, we address the relationship between religious ritual and performance art. Students will observe ritual performances such as sacramental procedures, liturgical processions, song, dance, and dramatic re-enactments in order to think critically about the role that these performances play in shaping the interpretive approach of the practitioner. The semester will conclude with a comparative analysis of the ways that the different styles of art (literary, visual, performance) could be understood to correspond with different modes of religiosity (text-based, image-based, and performative) and, ultimately, how they impact the interpretive process.

ITEMIZED LEARNING OUTCOMES

Upon successful completion of RELG 270, students will be able to:

1. Analyze works of literary, visual, and/or performance art with sensitivity to the ways that their style and composition reflect, shape, and/or contest particular religious configurations;
2. Compare the differing characteristics of specific artistic periods or styles as they relate to the historical development and social context of various religious traditions and movements;

3. Explain how religious discourse and practice associated with literary, visual, and/or performance art makes particular kinds of interpretive methods attractive and transmittable;
4. Demonstrate an understanding of basic analytical concepts and criteria utilized within the academic study of religion and discuss how they may be used in the evaluation, interpretation, and critical understanding of literary, visual, and/or performance art.

SAMPLE REQUIRED TEXTS/SUGGESTED READINGS/MATERIALS

1. Bynum, Caroline Walker. *Christian Materiality: An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe* (Zone Books, 2011)
2. Morgan, Brian. *The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice* (University of California Press, 2005)
3. Renard, John, ed. *Fighting Words: Religion, Violence, and the Interpretation of Sacred Texts* (University of California Press, 2012)
4. Sardar, Ziauddin. *Reading the Qur'an: The Contemporary Relevance of the Sacred Text of Islam* (Oxford, 2011)
5. Shapiro, James. *Oberammergau: The Troubling Story of the World's Most Famous Passion Play* (Vintage Books, 2000)
6. Whitehouse, Harvey and James Laidlaw, eds. *Ritual and Memory: Toward a Comparative Anthropology of Religion* (Altamira Press, 2004)
7. In addition to the above-listed textbooks, students are required to have access and basic familiarity with Blackboard. Excerpts of sacred texts, slides of devotional images, videos of religious rituals, and selected articles from *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and the Arts* (Oxford, 2014) will be available there.

SAMPLE ASSIGNMENTS AND/OR EXAMS

1. **Quizzes:** At the beginning of each class meeting, students will be given five to ten minutes to write short answers (one or two paragraphs) to questions about the assigned reading. The quizzes will be open-book and aim to evaluate the students' comprehension of the reading as well as their ability to think critically about its content. The quiz questions will be addressed in that day's lecture and in-class discussion. Quizzes may only be made up in cases of an excused absence (see Attendance Policy as described below).
2. **Short Papers:** Throughout the semester, students will write and submit three short (4 page) papers, one for each of the three parts of the course. The papers should address three examples of the kind of religiosity being covered in that part of the course. Students may write about a wide range of examples, including: observing a religious service to see how texts are interpreted and incorporated into the service (like a wedding, a bible study, or a holiday ceremony); finding a current event that relates to the interpretation of art and religion (the homeless Jesus statue in Davidson, NC, that inspired protest among some residents, for example); taking note of religious images to see how they function as markers of identity or affiliation (bumper stickers, t-shirts); selecting a particular art object to investigate more closely. The papers will be evaluated in terms of clarity, attention to detail, and ability to compare and explain differing

characteristics of the three chosen examples in terms of their historical and social contexts.

3. **Research Project/Presentation:** Working in small groups, students will identify one specific text, image, or ritual performance. Upon approval by the professor, students will research the work and prepare a brief written report (5 pages) and oral presentation (10 minutes). Reports and presentations will be evaluated in terms of clarity, precision, and the ability to explain how the religious discourse and/or practices associated with the group's chosen work of art reflects, shapes, contests, or makes attractive a particular kind of interpretive method. Further details will be distributed and discussed in class.
4. **Final Exam:** A comprehensive in-class written exam covering the assigned readings as well as material delivered in class (lectures, slides, films, plenary/team discussions, and so forth). The exam aims to evaluate students' understanding of basic concepts utilized within the academic study of religion and utilize them in the evaluation, interpretation, and analysis of sacred texts, images, and ritual performance. The exam will contain specific items (a selection of a text, an image, a description of a ritual performance), which the student will assess in terms of the range of possible interpretations that could be associated with the item. Further details will be distributed and discussed in class.

SAMPLE COURSE OUTLINE WITH TIMELINE OF TOPICS, READINGS/ ASSIGNMENTS, EXAMS/PROJECTS

Week 1: Approaches to the Study of Religion and the Arts

Part One: Sacred Texts

Week 2: Theorizing Text-Based Religiosity

Week 3: Ways of Reading and Interpreting Sacred Texts, Part One

Week 4: Ways of Reading and Interpreting Sacred Texts, Part Two

Week 5: The Struggle for Interpretive Advantage in Public Discourse

PAPER #1 DUE [Comparative analysis of 3 examples of text-based religiosity]

Part Two: Images and Other Seen Objects

Week 6: Theorizing Image-Based Religiosity and Visual Piety

Week 7: Veneration, Worship, and Treatment of Devotional Images

Week 8: The Power of Relics

Week 9: Living, Breathing, Bleeding Images

PAPER #2 DUE [Comparative analysis of 3 examples of image-based religiosity]

Part Three: Religious Ritual and Performance

Week 10: Theorizing Religious Ritual

Week 11: Ritualized Movement and Spirituality

Week 12: Liturgical and Sacramental Performance

Week 13: Re-Enactment and Role-Playing

PAPER #3 DUE [Comparative analysis of 3 examples of religious ritual and/or performance]

Week 14: Course Wrap-Up and Presentation of Student Research Projects