

Religion 103: Understanding Religions

Course Description

This course is an in-depth investigation of religion from a variety of perspectives employed in the contemporary study of religion. With attention to religion as a global, cross-cultural human phenomenon, we will examine multiple traditions, geographical locations and historical periods. Exemplary scholarly approaches to the study of religions from the humanities and social sciences will provide a basis for empathetically exploring religious self-understandings while also critically examining them within larger political, social and cultural contexts.

Course Objectives

Students will work towards the following objectives in this course:

- To articulate what is at stake in various scholarly and legal attempts to define “religion”
- To become acquainted with the history, ideas, and practices of specific religious traditions
- To empathetically and critically engage with ideas and practices across cultural, historical, and ideological divides
- To learn how to read and analyze the works of major thinkers in the academic study of religion
- To develop basic skills in research and writing in the field of religious studies

Literacies in the Major Learning Outcomes

In addition to the above course objectives, this course will introduce and reinforce key literacies in the Religious Studies curriculum. These include:

Information Literacy

You will learn to cite primary and secondary sources in the *Chicago Manual of Style* citation system.

You will learn how to recognize the purpose and value of different kinds of information, including distinguishing between primary and secondary sources.

Oral Literacy

You will participate in discussion, cogently express your ideas, and respond to others respectfully and effectively

Technology Literacy

You will effectively select and use tools to produce complex, professional printed documents.

Visual Literacy

You will look in a sustained way so as to carefully describe an image or object, noting formal qualities distinct from content.

You will learn how to situate images and objects in their historical contexts, aware of distinctions between representation and presence.

Forming a Community in a Global Pandemic

Before we get to all the cool stuff we'll be doing together in this class, and all the hard work we will put into it, let's start with some brutal honesty. We begin our Fall 2020 in the middle of a global pandemic. Particularly in the United States, COVID-19 has brought to the surface profound issues: inadequate public health infrastructure; drastic economic, social, and racial inequality; staggering political polarization; and disagreement and rancor over the most basic questions.

On 3 November, 2020 the US presidential election will take place, which will bring heightened emotions and anxiety on top of everything else we are dealing with.

My primary job as a teacher at this moment in time is to make sure we as a class are able to come together to support each other as a community. We need to get to know each other as people, learn to think and debate and grow intellectually together, and practice respect, kindness, and care for one another.

I promise to do everything I can to make our learning in this class rigorous, engaging, and sometimes even fun! In return, I ask you to promise to let me know what is working and what is not, and to not be shy about reaching out to me if you are facing challenges or need some extra time or help. We are in this together—let's create an awesome community and help each other learn as much as we can.



Our Work Together

Skidmore College requires me to assign you a grade for this course. From my own perspective as a teacher, *grades are basically evil and they work only to divide and disrupt our community of learning.* They corrupt us, pollute our motivations, and remove the joy from education.

To help reduce the anxiety and stress created by grades, in this course we will implement “contract grading.” This is a system whereby you have considerable freedom over the quantity and quality of the work you want to complete. An “A” grade will be the result of a significant amount of solid work. A “B” or a “C” grade will be the result of a choice to spend your time on other things. My hope is that you will all get “A”s because you are thrilled to engage fully in the class, but let’s be honest here. You may not find the course as exciting as you hoped, or you may find yourself overwhelmed by work in other courses. With contract grading you have some power over the amount of time and effort you want to invest in this course, and this is reflected in the final grade you earn. If we must have grades, it is best to give you some power and agency in this unseemly business.

Here is the work we'll do to learn together as a community:

Responsibilities

- ***Participation*** in the course is essential. This is a remote course, so there are lots of ways to participate. If you are an extrovert, one way to participate is to consistently show up to our synchronous class meetings and help us move the conversation forward by asking interesting questions, responding to your professor and your classmates, and generally keeping the ball rolling. If you are an introvert, or if you can't make our synchronous meetings, you should keep the asynchronous conversation moving on the Slack by posting questions and responses. For the purposes of contract grading, let's consider a "solid class conversation contribution or Slack post" to be the key unit of measurement here.
- We will be reading a wide range of material for this class, as well as listening to interesting podcasts. In order to prepare for lively discussions, you will be responsible for ***response posts*** over the course of the semester. A response post will be a short post (200–500 words) that communicate your *key takeaways* and *critical questions* for the day's reading or from the day's podcast episode. You may choose any day to post a response. For your response to count, it must be submitted by 10 PM on the night before the relevant class. (So a post for Thursday's class must be submitted by 10 PM Wednesday night.)
- By the end of the semester we will have studied many different approaches to thinking about religion. You will write a brief 750–1000 word ***method reflection*** thinking through the value of different tools used to study religion, and to reflect on your learning in this course.
- As Megan Goodwin says in the *Keeping it 101* podcast, "You may be done with religion, but religion's not done with you." Much of our work together will focus on learning how to see religion in the world around us. To that end, you will complete a short 500–750-word ***art reflection*** engaging closely with a work of religious visual art. To see how religion is talked about in the public square, you will complete a ***religion in the news*** exercise, analyzing a news article and researching scholarly sources that might help your classmates further understand what's at stake in current events. Finally, you may also complete a ***religion on the TV*** exercise, analyzing how religion is represented in TV show or in a movie.
- The final project for this class is to construct an annotated bibliography centered on an important theme or question in religious studies. This is done in several steps:
 - A ***Zotero citation exercise*** to help train you in using Chicago Manual of Style citations and tracking sources
 - An ***article annotation exercise*** in which you learn how to analyze a scholarly article in religious studies
 - Finally, you will conduct research and write a detailed ***proposal and annotated bibliography*** for your desired question or theme.

Grading

Category	“C” level	“B” level	“A” level
Participation	10 posts/discussion contributions	15 posts/discussion contributions	20 posts/discussion contributions
Reading and Reflecting	5 responses + 1 method reflection	7 responses + 1 method reflection	10 responses + 1 method reflection
Seeing Religion	1 art reflection	1 art reflection + 1 religion in the news exercise	1 art reflection + 1 religion in the news exercise + 1 religion on the TV exercise
Researching Religion	Zotero exercise	Zotero exercise + article annotation	Zotero exercise + article annotation + annotated bibliography

Course Policies

Course website and syllabus updates: The *Lotus Sūtra* teaches us about *upāyakaūśalya*, “skillfulness in expedient pedagogical techniques.” In the Buddhist tradition, good pedagogy is adaptive, adjusting to the proclivities and needs of particular students. As the semester progresses, I may make changes to the syllabus to ensure that our collective efforts are fruitful. If I do make changes to the syllabus, you will be notified via email, via the course website, and in an announcement in class. *Pay close attention to the course website for updates and announcements!*

Decorum: Texting, cell phone conversations, Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, Tiktok, Instagram, Tinder, &c. &c. are simply not welcome during class time. If you feel compelled to surrender your privacy to rapacious Silicon Valley marketers and to contribute to the corrosive forces of what Shoshana Zuboff calls “surveillance capitalism,” please do so outside our sacred halls of learning. If you engage in our synchronous class discussions, I strongly urge you to do so with all notifications, email, text messages, etc. turned off and with web browsers shut off.

Accommodations for Students with Disabilities: Skidmore College is committed to ensuring that all qualified students with disabilities are afforded an equal opportunity to participate in and benefit from its programs and services. If you are a student with a disability and believe you will need academic accommodation, you must formally request accommodation from Meg Hegener, Coordinator of Student Access Services. You will also need to provide documentation which verifies the existence of a disability and supports your request. For further information, please call 580-8150 or stop by the office of Student Academic Services in Starbuck Center. Please remember that *it is in your interest to initiate these conversations and request accommodation at the beginning of the semester!*

Title IX: Skidmore College considers sexual and gender-based misconduct to be one of the most serious violations of the values and standards of the College. Unwelcome sexual contact of any form is a violation of students’ personal integrity and their right to a safe environment and therefore violates Skidmore’s values. Sexual and gender-based

misconduct is also prohibited by federal and state regulations. Skidmore College faculty are committed to supporting our students and upholding gender equity laws as outlined by Title IX. If a student chooses to confide in a member of Skidmore's faculty or staff regarding an issue of sexual or gender-based misconduct, that faculty or staff member is obligated to tell Skidmore's Title IX Coordinator or Title IX Deputy Coordinator. The Title IX Coordinator or Deputy Coordinator will assist the student in connecting with all possible resources for support and options for reporting both on and off campus. Identities and details will be shared only with those who need to know to support the student and to address the situation through the college's processes. If the student wishes to confide in a confidential resource, the Counseling Center Staff, Health Services, and Victim Advocates (anonymous) are all options available.

More information can be found at the Sexual and Gender-Based Misconduct website or by contacting the Title IX Coordinator, Joel Aure (jaure@skidmore.edu), 580-5708, or Deputy Coordinator for Student Affairs, Gabriela Melillo (gmelillo@skidmore.edu), 580-5022.

Extracurriculars & Scheduling Conflicts: This syllabus contains the relevant deadlines for major assignments. You must notify me *by the second week of the term* about any known or potential extracurricular conflicts (such as religious observances, graduate or medical school interviews, or sports activities). If you have a conflict on the due date of an assignment or exam, it is your responsibility to notify me well in advance to work out an alternative date for the assignment or exam. *I will not accept assignments which are late due to extracurricular scheduling conflicts unless you have rescheduled with me well in advance.* It is your responsibility to communicate and plan with your professor.

Academic Honesty and Honorable Conduct: As a member of the Skidmore community, you are expected to follow the [Skidmore Honor Code](#). I take very seriously my commitment to teaching you the scholarly values of proper citation and attribution. Accordingly, I will report all incidents of suspected academic dishonesty—without exception—to the Associate Dean of the Faculty. **All instances of plagiarism, no matter how “minor,” will result in failure on the assignment, with the possibility of failure in the course.** *If you have any questions about the proper citation practices, please do not hesitate to contact me.*

S/CR/U Grade Option: If you are interested in the Satisfactory/Unsatisfactory (S/CR/U) grade option, you are responsible for being aware of the pertinent deadlines set by the Registrar's Office for choosing this option. Please be advised that the college criterion for “Satisfactory” is the equivalent of a C or better. A grade of “C-,” “D+,” or “D” will result in a grade of CR (“Credit”). Any grade below “D” will result in the student receiving the grade of “Unsatisfactory” or “U” and, as a consequence, the student will receive no credit for the course.

Late Assignments: We are doing a contract grading system this semester. This means you are responsible for organizing your own schedule and working at the pace that makes the most sense for you. Some assignments, like the method reflection, will have specified dates. But most of your work will be flexible to allow you to build your own schedule. *Reach out to me via my office hours if you want to chat about building a solid plan for completing your work!* If you need to be late with an assignment, get in touch with me and we can talk.

Required books

Carrasco, David. *Religions of Mesoamerica*. 2nd edition. Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2014. ISBN 9781478607403.

Nye, Malory. *Religion: The Basics*. 2nd edition. New York: Routledge, 2008. ISBN 9780415449489.

Patton, Thomas Nathan. *The Buddha's Wizards: Magic, Protection, and Healing in Burmese Buddhism*. New York:

Columbia University Press, 2018. ISBN 9780231187602.

Course Outline

Emoji key:

-  Synch day (class meets on Zoom)
-  Asynch day (no meeting). On asynch days, please do readings and post questions and responses to course Slack!
-  Time-specific assignment today!
-  Readings & Podcasts (to be completed before start of class)

T 25 August: Welcome!

Today we will do some icebreakers and go over the syllabus, as well as go through the tech tools we'll be using for this course.

Th 27 August: What is Religion?

 **Post a selfie with a self-introduction to our #selfies Slack channel!**

In class, we will collaboratively annotate the following article:

 Hitchens, Christopher. "Religion Poisons Everything." *Slate*, April 25, 2007.
http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/fighting_words/features/2007/god_is_not_great/religion_poisons_everything.html

T 1 September: Doing Religion and Doing Religious Studies

 Nye ch. 1, "Religion: Some Basics," pp. 1–21.

 Listen to *Keeping it 101*, Episode 1, "What the heck is religion, and what the heck is this podcast?"
(<https://keepingit101.com/e101>)

Th 3 September: Culture

 Nye ch. 2, "Culture," pp. 24–56.

 Miner, Horace. "Body Ritual among the Nacirema." *American Anthropologist* 58, no. 3 (1956): 503–7.

T 8 September: Culture

 Geertz, Clifford. “Religion as a Cultural System.” In *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*, edited by M. Banton, 1–46. London: Tavistock Publications, 1966.

Th 10 September: Who Gets Left Out of “Religion”? + Skills Workshop

 Listen to *Keeping it 101*, Episode 2, “Who gets left out of ‘religion?’” (<https://keepingit101.com/e102>)

In this class we will also go over the particulars of Zotero, the *Chicago Manual of Style*, etc.

T 15 September: Power

 Zotero exercise due!

 Nye ch. 3, “Power,” pp. 57–78.

Th 17 September: Belief

 Nye ch. 5, “Belief,” pp. 105–128.

 Orsi, Robert A. “Belief.” *Material Religion: The Journal of Objects, Art and Belief* 7, no. 1 (2011): 10–16.

T 22 September: Major Religions? Minor Religions? World Religions?

 Listen to *Keeping it 101*, Episode 3, “Major religions? Minor religions? Must we?” (<https://keepingit101.com/e103>)

 Listen to *Keeping it 101*, Episode 4 “World religions: shall we not” (<https://keepingit101.com/e104>)

Th 24 September: Mircea Eliade and “The Sacred”

 Eliade, Mircea. *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*. Translated by Willard R. Trask. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1959. Read pp. 8–65.

T 29 September: Religions of Mesoamerica I

 Carrasco “Introduction” and ch. 1, “Mesoamerica and Religions: Shock of the New and Different,” pp. 1–40.

Th 1 October: Religions of Mesoamerica II

 Carrasco ch. 2, “Mesoamerican Religions: Origins, Ancestors, and Histories,” pp. 41–74.

T 6 October: Religions of Mesoamerica III

 Carrasco ch. 3, “The Religion of the Aztecs,” pp. 75–112.

Th 8 October: Religions of Mesoamerica IV

 Carrasco ch. 4, “Maya Religion,” pp. 113–146.

T 13 October: Religions of Mesoamerica V

 Carrasco ch. 4, “Mesoamerica as a New Borderlands,” pp. 147–188.

Th 15 October: Texts

 Nye ch. 7, “Texts,” pp. 152–181.

 Hallisey, Charles. “The Surprise of Scripture’s Advice.” In *Religious Identity and the Problem of Historical Foundation: The Foundational Character of Authoritative Sources in the History of Christianity and Judaism*, edited by Judith Frishman, Willemien Otten, and Gerard Rouwhorst, 28–44. Jewish and Christian Perspectives Series 8. Leiden / Boston: Brill, 2004.

T 20 October: Ritual

 Nye ch. 6, “Ritual,” pp. 129–151.

 Listen to *Keeping it 101*, Episode 5, “What does it mean to be ‘religious?’” (<https://keepingit101.com/e105>)

Th 22 October: Gender

 Nye ch. 4, “Gender,” pp. 79–104.

T 27 October: Gender and Presence

 Orsi, Robert A. *History and Presence*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016. Read ch. 3, “Holy Intimacies,” pp. 72–112.

Th 29 October: The Buddha’s Wizards I

 Patton Introduction, pp. xix–xxxiv + ch. 1, “Vanguards of the *Sāsana*,” pp. 1–37

RE 103—Understanding Religions (Spring 2020)
TTh 16:30–18:20
Online

Dr. Ryan Richard Overbey
roverbey@skidmore.edu
Office Hours: By Appointment

T 3 November: The Buddha's Wizards II

 Patton ch. 2, "The Buddha's Chief Wizard," pp. 38–65.

Th 5 November: The Buddha's Wizards III

 Patton ch. 3, "Women of the Wizard King," pp. 67–96.

T 10 November: The Buddha's Wizards IV

 Patton ch. 4, "Pagodas of Power," pp. 97–113.

Th 12 November: The Buddha's Wizards V

 Patton ch. 5 + conclusion, pp. 114–140.

T 17 November: New Religious Movements

 Laycock, Joseph P. *Speak of the Devil: How the Satanic Temple is Changing the Way We Talk About Religion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019.

Read ch. 1, "The Day Satan Came to Oklahoma," pp. 1–26; ch. 5 "Religion or Trolls?," pp. 103–130.

 Listen to *Keeping it 101* Smart Grrl Summer, "What are Cults?" <https://keepingit101.com/smartgrrlsummer>

 If you can access it (currently on iTunes, Amazon Video, etc.), watch the film *Hail Satan?*
(<http://www.magpictures.com/hailsatan/watch-at-home/>)

Th 19 November: We're Not Done With Religions

 Listen to *Keeping it 101* Episode 6, "You might be done with religion, but religion is not done with you"
(<https://keepingit101.com/e106>)

 Watch the film *Kumaré* before class and be prepared to chat about it! (<https://skidmore.kanopy.com/video/kumare>)

F 4 December: Final Work Due by 17:00 Eastern Time