

Religion & Culture

RE 103, section 001

classroom: Tisch 205

meets: Mon 11:15-12:10

Tues & Thurs 11:10-12:30

RE 103, section 002

classroom: Tisch 302

meets: Mon 1:25-2:20

Tues & Thurs 2:10-3:30

Prof. G. Spinner

gspinner@skidmore.edu

office: Ladd 321

office phone: 580-8406

office hrs: Mon 3:00-4:00,

Tues 10:00-11:00,

or by appointment.

Course Description

Religion typically situates human actors in relation to nonhuman agents; and yet scholars of religion view it as a profoundly human activity -- as something “made” not by gods and spirits but by people. In this course we will endeavor to strike a balance between those perspectives, and to think about religion critically, although not unsympathetically. We will inquire into the relations between particular religions and their cultural contexts, and ask whether culture is best understood in terms of material conditions or through more abstract concepts and symbol systems.

Required Texts

Santeria: African Spirits in America, by Joseph M. Murphy .

Darsan: Seeing the Divine Image in India, by Diana L. Eck .

Additional readings will be made available as a Course Packet.

Recommended Text

The Harper Collins Study Bible. NRSV translation with annotations by members of the Society of Biblical Literature (Wayne Meeks, general ed.) .

We will occasionally be reading passages from the Bible, so I thought you might want to have it handy. Containing the foundational texts of Judaism and Christianity, and laying a major cornerstone for what has been termed ‘Western Civilization,’ the Bible is a library unto itself, and a book you might just want on your bookshelf. If you already have a copy of the Bible, provided it is a translation and not a paraphrase, then you may use that one; but if you don’t, I recommend this edition.

Studying Religion

In this course you will learn about certain religious traditions, but it also serves as an introduction to an academic discipline, the study of religion. Let me therefore venture one or two preliminary remarks about that academic study.

A course in religious studies is intended neither to promote nor demote any particular religious beliefs or activities. Rather, we need to distinguish being educated *about* religion from being indoctrinated *for* or *against* religion. Now in learning *about* religion, we aim to discover how religions orient their practitioners in space and time, providing personal meanings and structuring society. We find that religions are *embedded* in particular cultures, just as they are *embodied* by the people who practice them. We observe how religions exercise authority over people, even as they empower people to deal with everyday dilemmas or to act under extraordinary circumstances. We see religion commonly expressed in a variety of ways, so that we will be studying activities as diverse as divination, sacrifice, prayer and song, dance, spirit possession, and pilgrimage. We discover that religions are not timeless and unchanging, but develop in history, whether viewed in its epic sweep or in its quotidian specificity. In short, *people live their religions*; and we want to examine the ramifications of such a deceptively simple statement, considering both the impact of religion on culture and of culture on religion.

For many, the academic study of religion means adopting a comparative approach. To paraphrase a famous maxim of Max Müller, ‘One who knows only one, knows none.’ One way to gloss this maxim is to emphasize that the very category of “religion” emerges from awareness of and through a critical engagement with traditions other than one’s own. This leads to typical formulations in which we render the strange more familiar and the familiar less so. What we then undertake is both an exercise in appreciating diversity and in fostering critical thinking, given that we question the self-evident and carefully examine our evidence.

You will quickly notice, however, that we will not survey a great number of religious traditions. Rather than compare many, we will work closely with a select few. And so our focus this semester will be on Santeria and Hinduism, occasionally dipping into the Bible to find instructive counterpoints.

Let me conclude these opening remarks by saying that, within our broadly humanistic perspective, a certain pedagogic emphasis will be placed on trying to see how different ideas about self and world may be real and valid for someone else, and can be respected as such, without undermining or threatening one’s personal position. Any good course challenges you to rethink what you already know; and while this can at times be unsettling, we aim to explore these challenging ideas in a supportive environment.

Course Requirements

Your grade consists of the following components:

Participation	10 %
Quizzes	10 %
Midterm	20 %
Reflection papers	30 %
Visitation Assignment	30 %

Total	100 %
--------------	--------------

Participation is not a “gimme,” as it requires a strong and continual effort throughout the semester. Our goal is have a sustained and thoughtful conversation about this topic, and this will not be achieved through dispirited or half-hearted attempts. So: understand that ***attendance is mandatory***. You should make every effort to always be at class (and to be on time, and not leave prematurely). Of course, participation is far more than showing up. It is an active engagement: you must have done the reading and be prepared to discuss it. It is talking with and listening to others: you will be an integral part of that conversation. You should have questions; you should have comments; above all, you should have curiosity. We are going to think through some difficult materials together, and I expect each and every one of you to have something to contribute to that collaboration. *Real education is not a spectator sport.*

Do note that this is a 4 credit hour class, and thus my expectations for your time and effort, both inside and outside of the classroom, are set accordingly.

Quizzes are unannounced, and there are no make-ups. A missed quiz will be scored as a zero. Coming in once the quiz is underway or over means you have forfeited your chance to take it.

Reflection Papers are short pieces of writing (3-5 paragraphs, at least 2 pages) in which you respond to questions that I distribute ahead of time. You will write a reflection paper roughly once every week, and we will then use them as jumping off points for our discussions. You will also turn in your papers, and they will be graded .

The **Visitation Assignment** is an independent project undertaken outside of class time, in which you visit a religious service or site. The major stipulation is that you may not attend a service for a tradition to which you belong. Soon I will be distributing guidelines that explain more about the assignment and how to write it up. But if you are unsure as to what constitutes a sufficiently unfamiliar tradition, then please clear your visit with me beforehand.

Classroom Civility

Don't be late, and don't be rude. I hope that we will engage each other in open and honest ways, but both our speech and our demeanor should reflect common courtesy for those around us. Inappropriate or disruptive behavior will promptly result in being asked to leave the class.

Feel free to bring a beverage or snack, but not an entire meal.

Turn off cell phones and any other small electronic devices before you come to class. Take your headphones off, and stow anything that texts or beeps well out of sight. I will start the semester out by allowing the use of laptops, as some students prefer to take their notes this way, but I will promptly rescind this permission if I feel that people are paying more attention to their computer screen than to class. In short, anything that might provide a distraction to the user, to other students or to the instructor will not be indulged.

Honor Code

I expect you to live up to Skidmore's Honor Code and strictly avoid any forms of academic dishonesty. Copying from others, submitting someone else's work as your own, or submitting your same work for two different courses are all forms of cheating. Any fact, word or thought that originated with somebody else must be promptly and properly cited. Plagiarism, even when inadvertently performed, is a serious violation of academic integrity, and will be treated as such. Suspected infractions of the Honor Code will be duly reported to the Dean of Academic Advising.

Partners in Learning

To my mind, this syllabus establishes a kind of social contract, in which you and I agree to create a stimulating and supportive learning environment. I hope that at the core of this agreement we discover a mutual desire for understanding and an increased appreciation for respectful disagreement. Whether engaging the instructor or other students, I simply ask that you be civil, even as I will push you to be honest and open in your thinking.

I trust that with this syllabus I have made clear my expectations, and that if I have not, you will call me to account. I also ask that you make your expectations clear to me, and let me know how we can best achieve that partnership in learning. You may always ask questions; I will not mind if you ask me to repeat something or to clarify a point. Feel free to come by my office, or to contact me by e-mail or phone, in order to discuss any matters pertaining to the course.

I look forward to an exciting semester working together.

Dr. Spinner

RE 103 / FALL 2009
Class & Reading Schedule

Please Note: *You should have the assigned readings done **before** you come to the class for which they have been assigned*

Sept 10. Introduction: The Academic Study of Religion. Expectations for the Course.

Sept 14. *Santeria*. Video: Yo Soy Hechicero / I Am a Sorcerer.
Reading: Murphy, pp. vii –20.

Sept 15. *Santeria*. Spirits of Africa. Reading: Murphy, pp. 21-36;
Also read the Lucumi myths (CP-1).

Sept 17. Discussion: *What is Religion?* Reading: Burrige (CP-2).

Sept 21. *Santeria*. Saints and Orishas. Reading: Murphy, pp. 37-48.

Sept 22. *Santeria*. Divination. Reading: Murphy, pp. 49-69.

Sept 24. Discussion: *Secrets & Revelations*. Readings from the Bible:
Exodus 28:6, 15, 29-30; 1 Sam 14:41-42, 23:9-12 and 30:7-8.

Sept 28. **No class:** Yom Kippur.

Sept 29. *Santeria*. Sacrifice. Reading: Murphy, pp. 70-83.
Also read from the Bible: Leviticus 1:14-2:3, 3:12-17, and 17:1-16.

Oct 1. Discussion: *Religion in the Courts*. Readings are on-line. Start with “The Supreme Court: Animal Sacrifice,” as reported by Linda Greenhouse & available at the *New York Times* archive (June 12, 1993). Consult the actual text of the decision (*Church of the Lukumi Babalu Aye v. City of Hialeah* (91-948), 508 U.S. 520), which is reproduced on many legal Web sites; I recommend the full and annotated version found at <userwww.sfsu.edu/~biella/santeria/dec1.html>. Also read “Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment” on Wikipedia.

Oct 5. *Santeria*. Initiation. Video: The King Does Not Lie.

Readings: Murphy, pp. 84-91. Bible: Exodus 29; cf. Lev 8.

Oct 6. *Santeria*. Possession: The Orishas Dance & Speak.

Video: Voices of the Orishas. Reading: Murphy, pp. 92-100.

Oct 8. Discussion: *Surrender and Empowerment*.

Read from the Bible: 1 Sam 10:5-6, 19:18-24 and 2 Kings 3:10-15.

Class & Reading Schedule, continued

- Oct 12.** *Santeria Explained: Acculturation.* Reading: Murphy, pp. 103-125.
Oct 13. *Santeria Explained: Ashe.* Reading: Murphy, pp. 126-143.
Oct 15. *Hierophanies: Manifestations of the "Sacred."* Reading: Eliade (CP-3).

Oct 21. *Opportunity for extra credit:* Talk by Joel Kaminsky,
"Envisioning the Other: Does The Bible Promote Intolerance?"
8 pm in Davis Auditorium.

- Oct 19.** *Hinduism.* Video: 330 Million Gods.
Oct 20. *Hinduism.* Renunciation & Non-Renunciation. Reading: Eck, pp. 1-22.
Oct 22. *Hinduism.* One God, Many Avatars. Reading: Eck, pp. 22-31.

Oct 26. *Hinduism.* Darshan: Seeing the Sacred. Reading: Eck, pp. 32-44.
Oct 27. *Hinduism.* Making Murtis. Reading: Eck, pp. 44- 63.
Oct 29. Discussion: *An Accidental Deity?* Reading: On-line. From the *New York Times* archives, read: "Romancing A Stone" by Trip Gabriel (Jan 16, 1994), and "Shrine Removed From San Francisco Park (uncredited, Jan 24, 1994).

- Nov 2.** *Hinduism.* Krishna: Divine Play. Reading: Hindu myths (CP-4).
Nov 3. *Hinduism.* Mira Bai: Devotion. Readings: Bhakti poems (CP-5),
and from Bible: Hosea 2:19-20; Song of Songs 5:2-8.
Nov 5. *Hinduism.* Pilgrimage: Seeking the Sacred. Readings: Eck, pp. 63-75 and
Haberman (CP-6). From the Bible: Deut 16: 1-17 and Psalm 84.

- Nov 9. **No class:** American Academy of Religion Meeting.
Nov 10. **No class:** American Academy of Religion Meeting.

(You could work on your visitation assignment....)

- Nov 12.** *Hinduism.* Caste: Ordering Society. Readings: Kinsley (CP-7),
the Purusha-Sukta (CP-8), and Leviticus, ch.15 (Bible).

Nov 16. Discussion: *Religion and Social Structure.* Reading: Paden (CP-9).
Nov 17. *Hinduism.* Puja: Honoring the Gods. Reading: Babb (CP-10), first part.
Read pages 31-46, and then skip to 103-108.
Nov 19. *Hinduism.* Puja, continued. Read Babb (CP-10), second part: pp. 46-61.

Class & Reading Schedule, continued

Nov 23. *Religion and Culture*. Readings: Geertz (CP-11) and Firth (CP-12).

Nov 24. Discussion: *Signs, Symbols & Systems*.

Nov 26. **No class:** Thanksgiving Break.

Nov 30. *Food taboos*: Symbolic logic. Readings: Leviticus ch.11, plus 21:16-23 and 22:17-25. Douglas (CP-13).

Dec 1. *Food taboos*: Practical logic. Reading: M. Harris (CP-14).

Dec 3. Discussion: *Logical or Magical Thinking?*

Dec 7. *Reviewing "Faith"*: Defenses & Accusations.

Readings: Tillich (CP-15). S. Harris (CP-16).

Dec 8. Conclusions.

Dec 10. More Conclusions.

The Visitation Assignment is due on Dec 11.

It should be turned in to me or at the PH & RE Office no later than 4:30 pm.

No extensions, and no excuses.

* * * * *

List of Additional Readings for **RE 103**

RELIGION & CULTURE

Reading 1: **Lucumi Myths**, adapted by Gregory Spinner.

Reading 2: **Religion and Redemption**

Excerpted from Kenelm Burridge, New Heaven, New Earth (Basil Blackwell, 1969), pp. 4-7.

Reading 3: **Hierophanies: Manifestations of the "Sacred."**

Excerpted from Mircea Eliade, The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion (Harcourt Brace Jovanich, 1957), pp. 8-12.

- Reading 4: **Hindu Myths**, adapted by Gregory Spinner.
- Reading 5: **Songs of Devotion and Desire: Bhakti Poems by Mirabai.**
Excerpted from John Stratton Hawley and Mark Juergensmeyer, Songs of the Saints of India (Oxford University, 1988), pp. 120-140.
- Reading 6: **Hungry Mountains and Ponds of Love: Pilgrims in Braj.**
Excerpted from David L. Haberman, Journey Through the Twelve Forests (Oxford University, 1994), pp. 92-94, 105-108, and 121-125.
- Reading 7: **On Varna: The Case of Havik Brahmins.**
Excerpted from David Kinsley, Hinduism: A Cultural Perspective (Prentice Hall, 1993), pp. 152-169.
- Reading 8: **The Hymn of 'Man.'**
Rig Veda 10.90. Translated by Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty in Hindu Myths (Penguin, 1975), pp. 27-28.
- Reading 9: **As Society, So Religion.**
Excerpted from William Paden, Interpreting the Sacred (Beacon Press, 1992), pp. 28-37 and 44-47.
- Reading 10: **The Food of the Gods: Puja.**
Excerpted from Lawrence A. Babb, The Divine Hierarchy: Popular Hinduism in Central India (Columbia University, 1975), pp. 31-61 and 103-108.
- Reading 11: **Religion as a Cultural System.**
Excerpted from Clifford Geertz, The Interpretation of Cultures (Basic Books, 1973), pp. 89-91, 95-99, 123 and 140-141.
- Reading 12: **Signs and Symbols.**
Excerpted from Raymond Firth, Symbols: Public and Private (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973), pp. 64-66.
- Reading 13: **The Abominations of Leviticus.**
Excerpted from Mary Douglas, Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo (Routledge, 1966), pp. 42-58.
- Reading 14: **Sacred Cows and Abominable Pigs.**
Excerpted from Marvin Harris, Good To Eat: Riddles of Food and Culture (Waveland, 1998 reissue), pp. 13-16, and 47-84.
- Reading 15: **On Faith: Ultimate Concerns & Uncertainties.**
Excerpted from Paul Tillich, Dynamics of Faith (Harper & Row, 1957), pp. 1-2, 16-20, 32-33, and 74-77.
- Reading 16: **On Faith: Irrational, Intolerant & Intolerable.**
Excerpted from Sam Harris, The End of Faith: Religion, Terror and the Future of Reason (W.W. Norton, 2004), pp. 13-19, 20-23, 40-47, 64-65, 71-72 and 77-79.

