

**RE 375: Senior Seminar in Religion  
Spring 2015**

**Instructor: Mary Zeiss Stange, Ph.D.**

**Ladd 213**

**Office Hours: T 1:30-3:00, Wed. 10:00-12:00 & 2:00-4:00, and by appt.**

**Office Phone: x5408**

**Home Phone: 587-6380**

**E-mail: [mstange@skidmore.edu](mailto:mstange@skidmore.edu)**

Our theme for this semester is *the West vs. the rest*—that is, the popular presumption that “we Westerners,” by virtue of history (Euro-American), religion (monotheism, and more specifically Judeo-Christianity) and perhaps evolution (whiteness), are intrinsically superior to those “others” whose religious, political, moral or social systems differ markedly from ours. For those who ascribe to this bias in favor of values and belief systems identified with “the West,” it shapes their attitudes about and behavior toward not only “non-Western” people, but also those members of Euro-American society whose religious beliefs and/or behaviors—particularly when coupled with other kinds of “difference”—diverge significantly from the religious “mainstream.” This privileging of the West over the rest appears in both conservative and liberal political forms. There are Catholic, Protestant, Jewish and staunchly secular variations on the theme (and, ironically, even its atheist adherents consider Judeo-Christianity to be superior to any other form of religion).

The danger inherent in the opposition of the West to the rest has always been clear to academic students of religion—or, at least, to those students of religion who have not themselves promoted this oppositional approach. But now, perhaps more than ever, it is incumbent upon all of us who take religion seriously enough to devote a hefty chunk of our lives and psyches to its rigorous study, to educate ourselves and everyone within earshot about what’s wrong with this line of thinking.

It has been said that “everything changed” on September 11, 2001. That may or may not have been the case; it may well be that much had changed already, and most Americans simply hadn’t noticed. But it is undeniably true that one thing ought to have changed earlier, and has yet to change sufficiently: the level and tenor of public discourse about religion in this country. As students of and researchers about religion, we bear a particular responsibility to work toward that change. We have our work cut out for us. This “capstone” seminar is not an end, but the beginning.

We are going to be focusing on the particular role popular assumptions about religion (and its truth or falsity) play in the construction of “the Other”—culturally, socially, politically, economically, ecologically, and spiritually considered. Toward this end, we will as a group consider two broad and complex “case studies,” in terms both of their historical development and their contemporary expression:

- The first has to do with the construction of the Islamic (Islamist) Other. Our primary texts here will be Edward Said’s now-classic *Orientalism*, and Ayaan Hirsi Ali’s trenchant “insider” critique of Islam, *Infidel*.

- Our second focus will be on the construction of the primal/primitive in distinction to more “advanced” or more highly evolved forms of belief and practice. Here our primary texts include two works which are controversial in their own right: Freud’s *Future of an Illusion*, and Patrick Tierney’s much more recent (and much more incendiary) *Darkness in El Dorado*.

Bracketing these two case studies we will consider two other texts:

- A pre-reading to set us up for the semester, journalist Jon Ronson’s *THEM: Adventures with Extremists*, which develops the idea that “they” may have more in common with “us” than we would like to think!
- And Bron Taylor’s *Dark Green Religion*, which posits the experience of otherness, in radical terms, as fundamental to 21<sup>st</sup> Century religious consciousness.

Having completed this capstone course in Religion, students will be able to:

- *Describe, compare, and critically evaluate* the key issues and themes constituting the role religion plays in the construction of social and/or cultural “otherness.”
- *Appreciate* the diverse and complex relationships between religion and politics as these relationships play out in specific social, cultural, and geographic contexts.
- *Recognize* ways in which ideological and social justice issues intersect, with special emphasis on the religious responses that have recently emerged to address this intersection.
- *Apply* the theoretical perspectives introduced in the course to practical, “real world” situations.
- *Engage in sophisticated research* in the field of religious studies, and produce a polished piece of writing grounded in that research.
- *Evaluate* their own views on religious and cultural difference, taking into account the way(s) they have been consciously and unconsciously influenced by biases transmitted in popular and educational media.

#### **Format:**

For roughly the first two-thirds of the semester, we will read and discuss the texts above. Seminar participants will share responsibility for leading our discussions. This leadership will take the form both of presenting overviews of the previous class session, and raising questions to introduce the current day’s readings. While we are engaged in this collective exploration of variations on the theme of Us vs. the (deviant and/or dangerous) Other, each seminar participant will simultaneously be working on the early stages of her or his semester project: isolating a topic, developing a research strategy, bibliography and working outline, and commencing the reading. For those students also working on a thesis (in Religion or a cognate field), the seminar project will most likely be directly related to that larger work (although *not* itself a part of it). For students not writing a thesis, the semester project will be a substantial paper or other production, involving significant independent research and creative thinking. The Professor will also be working on her own semester project—a presentation on hunting ritual and spirituality to be delivered in the Artemis Working Group at the General Assembly of the International Council on Game and Wildlife Conservation in Sofia, Bulgaria in late April.

During the last third of the semester, seminar participants will take turns assigning readings from their own research and leading in-depth discussion on these readings, thereby introducing the group to the subjects of their semester projects. At the close of the semester, in the last two weeks (and involving an additional class meeting, in lieu of a final exam), each participant will present their projects as works-in-progress (and relatively near completion at that point). The questions and constructive criticisms of their seminar colleagues will help them to bring their projects to completion.

### Bases for Evaluation

Short Essays (2).....	20%
Class Participation (includes leading discussion).....	20%
Capstone Project (includes work-in-progress presentations).....	60%
	100%

### Schedule:

- Jan 20: Introduction; Ronson, *THEM: Adventures with Extremists*  
 22: Said, *Orientalism*, 1-166; *Crusades* [excerpts]
- 27: *Orientalism*, continued. *Lawrence of Arabia* [excerpts]  
 29: *Orientalism*, 166-352.
- Feb 03: *Orientalism*, concluded. \*\*\***First Short Essay Assignment**\*\*\*  
 05: Hirsi Ali, *Infidel*, Foreword,. Film: *Submission, Part I*. Ibn Warraq, "The Koran," from *Why I Am Not a Muslim*, 384-444 & "The Totalitarian Nature of Islam," 445-453. [Handout]
- \*\*\***This week (if not before): Individual meetings with Professor to discuss capstone projects.**\*\*\*  
 10: *Infidel*, TBA. Film: *Osama*.  
 12: *Infidel*, TBA. Film clip: "Debate" between Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Tariq Ramadan.
- \*17: The Primal Scene: Freud's *Totem and Taboo* [Handout]. Video: *The Ax Fight*  
 \*\*\***First Short Essay Due**\*\*\*  
 19: Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*
- \*24: Wrangham, *Demonic Males* excerpt [Handout]; Chagnon, *The Fierce People* excerpt [Handout] \*\*\***Capstone Project Prospectus Due**\*\*\*  
 26: Tierney, *Darkness in El Dorado*, Introduction and Part I
- Mar 03: *Darkness in El Dorado*, Intro. And Part I, con't. Video: *Contact: The Yonomami Indians of Brazil* \*\*\***Second Short Essay Assignment**\*\*\*  
 05: Film: *At Play in the Fields of the Lord*

10: Tierney, *Darkness in El Dorado*, Part II, Chaps. 8-10 and 13, pp. 125-180,  
215-223

\*12: Tierney, *Darkness in El Dorado*, Part III, Chap. 15, pp. 243-256 \*\*\***Second Short  
Essay Due**\*\*\*

17-19: ***Spring Break***

24: Student-assigned readings and discussion

26: Student-assigned readings and discussion

Apr 31: Student-assigned readings and discussion  
02: Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*

07: *Avatar* [excerpts] + articles TBD

09: A conversation (via Skype) with Bron Taylor.

14: *Dark Green Religion*, continued

16: Work-in-progress Presentations

21: Work-in-progress Presentations

23: No Class.

28: Wrap-up

Additional class (date to be determined): Year-end party and informal presentations, at the Professor's home.

The capstone project is due, in hardcopy, in the PH & RE Office no later than 4:00 p.m. Tuesday, May 5<sup>th</sup>. Absolute deadline: no exceptions, no extensions.