

## 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.

## ***Responsibilities***

- ***Participation*** in the course is essential. Participation does not mean simply attending class and handing in written assignments. Participation means active involvement in discussion. One need not know all the answers to speak up; the classroom is a space where questions are especially valued. Come to every class prepared with your insights and your questions. It will be assumed that all students will have completed the session's reading BEFORE arriving to class. You may be called on at any time to contribute to the class with your ideas and questions. We may occasionally break out into smaller groups to have discussions about readings. Your preparation and participation will be vital for these conversations.
- We will be reading a wide range of material for this class. In order to prepare for lively discussions, you will be responsible for ten ***reading responses*** to the course website over the course of the semester. A reading response will be a short post (200–500 words) that communicate your *key takeaways* and *critical questions* for the day's reading. You may choose any ten days 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 Wednesday's class must be submitted by 10 PM Tuesday night.)
- Fluency in the academic study of religion requires competence in seeing and analyzing material aspects of human culture, such as art and architecture. To this end students will complete a short 500–750-word ***art reflection*** engaging closely with a work of religious art.
- In this course we will develop an understanding of why and how religion matters in our public life. To this end you will complete a ***religion in the news*** exercise, analyzing a news article and offering scholarly sources that might help your classmates further understand the issues at stake in current events.
- 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.
- The final project for this class is a *review of a scholarly monograph on religion*. This is done in several steps:
  - A ***Zotero citation exercise*** to help train you in using Chicago Manual of Style citations and tracking sources
  - A ***library research exercise*** to help you develop skills in using library resources
  - A brief ***proposal and annotated bibliography*** for your book review project
  - The project itself, a well-written ***book review*** in 1000–2000 words addressing the book's contribution to the study of religion and placing the author's work within the broader scholarly conversation.

## Grading

Attendance and participation	25%
Reading Responses x 10	20%
Art Reflection	5%
Religion in the News Exercise	5%
Method Reflection	5%
Zotero Exercise	5%
Library Research Exercise	5%
Book Review Project Proposal & Bibliography	5%
Book Review Project	25%

## 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 in the classroom. If you feel compelled to surrender your privacy to rapacious Silicon Valley marketeers and to contribute to the corrosive forces of what Shoshana Zuboff calls “surveillance capitalism,” please do so outside our sacred halls of learning. With that said, you are free to use laptops or tablets, and I will not monitor, parent, or police you in any way. I assume you are mature and responsible enough to come to the classroom prepared and focused.

**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 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 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 are all options available.

More information can be found at <https://www.skidmore.edu/sgbm/> or by contacting the Title IX Coordinator or Deputy Coordinator.

**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/U Statement:** If you are interested in the Satisfactory/Unsatisfactory (S/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-” or below 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:** Late papers will be immediately deducted one step (A to A-, A- to B+, B+ to B, etc.), followed by one additional step every twelve hours. I will never grant extensions on assignments unless there is a dire medical emergency.

## ***Required books***

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

Nye, Malory. *Religion: The Basics*. 2<sup>nd</sup> 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***

### **W 22 January: Introductions: What is “Religion”?**

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](http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/fighting_words/features/2007/god_is_not_great/religion_poisons_everything.html)

### **F 24 January: Doing Religion and Doing Religious Studies**

Listen to Episode 1 of the podcast *Keeping it 101: A Killjoy's Introduction to Religion*  
( <http://keepingit101.buzzsprout.com> )

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

### **W 29 January: Culture**

Nye ch. 2, “Culture,” pp. 24–56.

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

### **F 31 January: 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.

### **W 5 February: Skills Workshop: *Chicago Manual of Style* and Zotero**

Listen to Episode 2 of the podcast *Keeping it 101: A Killjoy's Introduction to Religion*  
( <http://keepingit101.buzzsprout.com> )

### **F 7 February: Power**

Nye ch. 3, “Power,” pp. 57–78.

### **W 12 February: Belief**

#### ***Zotero Exercise Due at Beginning of Class***

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.

## F 14 February: Skills Workshop: Library Research

## W 19 February: Mircea Eliade and the Sacred

Listen to Episode 3 of the podcast *Keeping it 101: A Killjoy's Introduction to Religion*  
( <http://keepingit101.buzzsprout.com> )

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.

## F 21 February: Religions of Mesoamerica I

### *Library Research Exercise Due at Beginning of Class*

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

## W 26 February: Religions of Mesoamerica II

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

## F 28 February: Religions of Mesoamerica III

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

## W 4 March: Religions of Mesoamerica IV

### *Art Reflection Due at Beginning of Class*

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

## F 6 March: Religions of Mesoamerica V

Listen to Episode 4 of the podcast *Keeping it 101: A Killjoy's Introduction to Religion*  
( <http://keepingit101.buzzsprout.com> )

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

RE 103—Understanding Religions (Spring 2020)  
WF 12:20–14:10  
Tisch 204

Dr. Ryan Richard Overbey  
roverbey@skidmore.edu  
Office Hours: TW 10–12:00 @ Ladd 212

**W 11 March: No class—Spring Break!**

**F 13 March: No class—Spring Break!**

**W 18 March: 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.

**F 13 March: No class—RRO at AOS and AAS conferences in Boston!**

Nye ch. 6, “Ritual,” pp. 129–151.

**W 25 March: Gender**

Listen to Episode 5 of the podcast *Keeping it 101: A Killjoy’s Introduction to Religion*  
( <http://keepingit101.buzzsprout.com> )

Nye ch. 4, “Gender,” pp. 79–104.

**F 27 March: Gender**

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

**W 1 April: The Buddha’s Wizards I**

***Book Review Project Proposal Due at Beginning of Class***

Patton Introduction, pp. xix–xxxiv

**F 3 April: The Buddha’s Wizards II**

Listen to Episode 6 of the podcast *Keeping it 101: A Killjoy’s Introduction to Religion*  
( <http://keepingit101.buzzsprout.com> )

Patton ch. 1, “Vanguards of the *Sāsana*,” pp. 1–37.

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### **W 8 April: The Buddha's Wizards III**

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

### **F 10 April: The Buddha's Wizards IV**

#### ***Religion in the News Exercise Due at Beginning of Class***

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

### **W 15 April: The Buddha's Wizards V**

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

### **F 17 April: The Buddha's Wizards VI**

Listen to Episode 7 of the podcast *Keeping it 101: A Killjoy's Introduction to Religion*  
( <http://keepingit101.buzzsprout.com> )

Patton ch. 5, "Wizards in the Shadows" + conclusion, pp. 114–140.

### **W 22 April: New Religions**

Listen to Episode 8 of the podcast *Keeping it 101: A Killjoy's Introduction to Religion*  
( <http://keepingit101.buzzsprout.com> )

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.

### **F 24 April: What is Religion?**

#### ***Method Reflection Due at Beginning of Class***

We will watch the film *Kumaré* in class and wrap up the semester!

### **Th 7 May: Book review project due via email at 17:00**