

Re 103: Religion & Culture

Professor: Marla Segol

Meetings: Tuesdays and Thursdays 3:40-5:30, Tisch 302

Office Hours: Mondays, 1-2; Wednesdays 4:40-5:40, or by appointment.
215 Ladd Hall

Course Description:

In this course we will examine the expression of some primary characteristics of religion in primary sources from a variety of religious traditions. We will focus specifically on the ways in which ideas about the sacred are formed and how they are used to order experience, with a focus on space, time, and story. All of these, in turn, are part of imagining deity. We will then look at how these ordering concepts are used to formulate guidelines for daily life, as expressed in ritual, ethics, and doctrines of salvation.

Goals for the course:

Re103 is intended to fulfill the all-college requirement in Humanities. The goals of this course are as follows:

1. You will be familiar with the categories scholars use for inquiry into religion and how it works. These include the sacred, sacred space, myth, ritual, scripture, deity, theodicy, and ethics, among others.
2. You will become familiar with three religious traditions, Judaism, Hinduism, and Christianity.
3. You will compare them on the basis of the above categories, to get first, a better sense of what the categories themselves include and exclude, and second, to get a sense of the particularities of each tradition, so that we can understand differences in experience across cultures.
4. You will gain an understanding of some of the questions posed by Religious Studies such as a) How do religious communities understand the divine, the human situation, and the world? b) With what sorts of apparatus do they do this? c) What is the interplay between religious texts and communities? d) What is the interrelationship of religion with other dimensions of human experience, such as politics, technology, and the arts?
5. Finally, you will gain an appreciation of the breadth and range of religious experience.

The Structure:

This course is based in the processes of dialogue - between the texts we read, the cultures we know, and with each other. While we will rely on our textbook (*Anatomy of the Sacred*) to provide themes, terms, and context for our discussions, we will focus most intently on how ideas about religion and its meanings play out in primary religious sources.

Getting in touch:

Come to my office hours, or e-mail me at msegol@skidmore.edu

Required Texts:

1. *Anatomy of the Sacred* by James Livingston. ...
2. Wendy Doniger: *Rig Veda*, Penguin
3. New Oxford Annotated Bible
4. Coursepack

Course Requirements:

1. Attendance. Attendance is required.

2. Reading. You are required to do ALL of the reading for this course. You will be accountable for it in a variety of ways throughout the term, including informed class participation, reading questions, and contribution to class discussion.

3. Class participation: (10 points) Class participation is a must. I will lecture for about half of each class, while the remainder of most meetings will consist of structured class discussion. You will be graded on your informed participation.

4. Notebook: Reading questions and step-by-step exercises: (60 points)

I've assigned a reading question and/or a step-by-step exercise for each class. You are to answer these questions in your class binder dedicated especially to this purpose. And, you are to bring your notebook to class every time it meets so that you can refer to your answers for class discussion. I'll collect and grade the notebooks four times during the term. These dates are: 2/10; 3/4; 4/7; and 4/28

5. Final Paper Proposal (5 points) Due 4/9

6. Final Paper 4-5 Pages (25 points) Due 5/4

7. Participation in "New Judaisms" conference, at Skidmore, from 2/9-10.

2/12

1. Livingston, ch 3: Sacred Symbol, Myth, and Doctrine

2/17:

On Revelation and Faith: class Visitor: Ladd 307

2/19

2. From Geertz: Interpretation of Cultures

3. Moses on the Mountain, Exodus 19-25

Use Geertz to talk about the process of transforming religious symbols into action. Explain how this works using examples from the sacred texts we've read so far, including Exodus. Also apply any other theorists you deem helpful.

2/24

4. Introduction to Hinduism: *Hinduism*. Video: 330 Million Gods

5. Introduction to Hinduism, Kinsley, pp 1-10, Overview of Hindu Traditions, 85-110, Central Hindu Beliefs

No reading response due. Come to class with questions.

2/26

6. Soma: Rig Veda, pp119-37
7. Babb, Foods of the Gods, Puja

How do the narratives relate to the ritual of Puja? What is the relation between myth and ritual?

3/2

8. Introduction to Christianity, Molloy,

No reading response due. Come to class with questions.

3/4

9. Jesus goes to the Mountain and the Temple: Matthew: 4-8:4; 15; 24-5; 27-28

What happens on the mountain? Compare this to Exodus 19-25. How does this material reinterpret the Exodus material? How does Jesus use the Holy Temple, How does location matter, and how is sanctity conferred? How is someone or something de-sanctified?

SPRING BREAK 3/7-15

3/17:

10. St. Mary of Egypt
11. Smith: the Wobbling Pivot

Explain what is sanctified, and how. What is sacred, what conveys sacred power? Is it space? Is it stories? Is it the body? Is it something else? Use Smith to talk about this.

3/19

12. Life of Brian: the movie
13. Smith: Map is Not Territory

Be prepared to use Smith to discuss the real-life use of myth in Life of Brian, and in other materials we've read so far. Write the response after you've seen the movie.

3/24

14. Livingston: Ritual Chapter 4, plus, get started on the Leviticus for 3/19.

Name and describe the theoretical models for understanding ritual. Apply one to material we've studied so far.

3/31

15. Judaism: Leviticus: 11-13; 15; 17-18
16. Mary Douglas, from Purity and Danger

What are these texts? What are they saying, and what is their purpose? What is Mary Douglas' main argument? Apply it to your reading of the Leviticus texts we've read so far.

4/2: Christianity

17. 1 Corinthians 10-11, revisit Matthew 5; 15
18. 2 Peter 2

Can we apply Douglas' argument about purity to the texts we've read from both Judaism and Christianity? In what ways is this possible, and in what ways is it not?

4/7

19. Good to Eat? By Marvin Harris

What does Harris say about the origin and the function of food taboos? Compare Douglas' and Harris' arguments about food taboos. Which is more convincing and why? Prove it by applying both to one text we've read, and explaining why you get better results from one rather than the other.

PAPER PROPOSAL DUE 4/9

4/9

20. Deity: Livingston

Use terms from Livingston to describe the deity you think most people believe in right now. Explain how and why they apply.

Judaism

21. Ezekiel, chs 1-2; 10; 16

22. Maimonides: 13 attributes of God; from the Guide

Compare these two descriptions of God, and compare and contrast the ways in which people are to relate to them.

4/14 Hinduism:

23. Seeing the Sacred, and One God, Many Avatars. Reading: Eck, Darsan, pp. 3-31

Compare this description of the human relation to God to the others.

4/16

24. Agni; 97-112; 117-8

25. Indra; 139-59

26. Realia 229-42

Characterize the gods described here, and compare them to the others described thus far. How do the other characters experience them? What do they do? Which of the theoretical models we've encountered so far can help us to understand this?

4/21

27. John 13-21

What is the significance of this meal, what does it mean to participate in it, and what does it reveal about the nature of the participants? What sort of God is this, according to Livingston? And what sorts of demands are made of the followers?

4/23

28. Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love* pp 61-92

29. Viewing: Altered States, selections.

How does Julian experience the divine? Upon which narrative models, which stories, does she draw in her description of her experiences?

For fun: not required:

- 30. Flying Spaghetti Monster: <http://www.venganza.org/>
- 31. Mr Deity: Creation, episode 1, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qzf8q9QHfhl>;
Mel Brooks, Carl Reiner, 2000 year old man, episode, tba
- 32. Melinda Ribner: New Age Judaism: Who, what, and where is God?

4/28 Theodicy

33. Theodicy and Ethics: Livingston

What are the different kinds of theodicy? Which makes the most sense to you and why?