

**RE103, Religion and Culture**  
**Meets TR 3.40-5.30, in Bolton 103**  
**Dr. Catherine Burris, cburris@skidmore.edu**  
**Office hours: Ladd 215, WF 2.15-3.15 and by appointment**

**COURSE DESCRIPTION:**

This is an introductory course on the nature of religion, the interaction of religion and culture, and the function of religious belief in the life of the individual and the group. We will consider five major religious traditions - Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism - through the lens of pilgrimage. Readings will be drawn from primary and secondary sources.

**Learning Objectives**

Over the course of the term, you will acquire or polish four skills:

- Close reading of primary religious texts and traditions;
- Critical reading of scholarly works about religion and religious texts;
- Choosing, evaluating, and pursuing research topics in religious studies;
- Writing clear and cogent analytical essays with appropriate evidence and argumentation.

By the end of the term, you will also be aware of and able to discuss the basic characteristics and some specific “local” versions of the five faith traditions we cover, as well as these methodological issues:

- The problem of essentialism in the study of religious traditions and how the idea of “culture” addresses it;
- The benefits and dangers of the comparative study of religious traditions;
- The differences between insider, outsider, and faith-based approaches to the study of religion.

**Required Texts, available in the bookstore (DO NOT PURCHASE E-VERSIONS)**

Kelner, Tours That Bind, ISBN 9780814748176.

Melczer, The Pilgrim’s Guide to Santiago de Compostela, ISBN 9780934977258.

Prothero, God is Not One, ISBN 9780061571282.

Reader, Making Pilgrimages, ISBN 9780824829070.

Sax, Mountain Goddess, ISBN 9780195069792.

Turabian, A Manual For Writers of Research Papers, ISBN 9780226823379.

Wolfe, One Thousand Roads to Mecca, ISBN 9780802135995.

**Grading**

You will be graded on a variety of assignments, both written and oral. None may be turned in late. Grammar, syntax, and correct choice of words to convey meaning always count, and could cost you up to one letter grade on any graded assignment. Further details on each assignment will be provided in class as due dates approach.

- 15 Discussion/participation: show up prepared, on time, ask questions, and make comments. As a part of your preparation, in addition to the assigned reading, you will write a one-page double-spaced response to a question or prompt. This will occur, on average, once a week, and these papers are due, in hard copy, at the beginning of class. They may not be turned in late, so have a backup printing plan. There will be at least one quiz on the syllabus, and perhaps more on content throughout the term. Neither position papers nor quizzes may be made up, and there will be more of them if discussion lags or members of the class seem consistently unprepared. Position papers and quizzes for material covered after the second exam through the end of the term, as well as discussion of that material, will bear more weight than the earlier material, as there is no final exam in this course. Position papers and quizzes will be graded check/plus/minus, with minimal comments.
- 20 Research paper: 10-12 pages, including footnotes but not counting title page, bibliography, and any appendices. Minimum of 6 acceptable secondary sources required. Must be done in Turabian footnote-bibliography style. Quality of bibliography and use of correct notation/bibliographic form each count for up to 5 points. You are required to turn in a topic, preliminary bibliography, and draft thesis for comments as part of your research process; if there are problems, you may be required to rewrite one or all of them. These will not earn you credit, they are for your instruction and benefit as you work on your paper. That said, failure to complete them will cost you up to three points each. The preliminary assignments will be graded check/plus/minus.
- 10 Rewrite of research paper: this will not change your initial grade on the research paper, but can ameliorate any ill effects on your final grade. Should you choose not to rewrite your paper, your initial grade on the paper will count for 30 points, and the quality of your bibliography and use of correct notation/bibliographic form will each count for up to 7.5 points.
- 15 Research presentation: you will prepare and present a ten minute, formal talk on your research paper. Your grade will be based on both the quality of the presentation and how well it conveys your research as presented in your paper.
- 15 First exam: a take-home, open-book essay of approximately five double-spaced pages. You will receive at least two prompts, from which you will choose one, 48 hours before the exam is due, and we will not meet on the due date. The exam will be due as an MSWord attachment to an email AND as an MSWord file uploaded to Blackboard through SafeAssign. It will be due at midnight on the due date – that is, at the last minute of the day on which is marked as due.
- 15 Second exam: just like the first exam.

10            Dossier: a notebook containing every marked-up, written assignment in this course, in order. You must use a bound report cover, the ones with a metal brad along the side to hold in the documents through two holes. [Example shown in class.] Missing assignments or use of some other sort of binder or folder will cost you points.

100 points possible for the course. The grading scale is:

|        |    |
|--------|----|
| 99-100 | A+ |
| 93-98  | A  |
| 90-92  | A- |
| 87-89  | B+ |
| 83-86  | B  |
| 80-82  | B- |
| 77-79  | C+ |
| 73-78  | C  |
| 70-72  | C- |
| 60-69  | D  |
| <60    | F  |

Rounding policy: .49 and below rounded down, .51 and above rounded up; .5 rounded down if participation score is below 10, up if participation score is 10 or above.

### **POLICIES AND CLARIFICATIONS**

Assignments are due in both in hard copy AND as an MSWord file through Blackboard SafeAssign at the beginning of the class session for which they are listed or announced in class. The only three exceptions to this are: position papers are due ONLY in hard copy, exams are due as an email attachment and through SafeAssign, and if you are deathly ill, you may email the position paper to me before class begins. Anything over one page [you may print on both sides, and I hope you will] MUST be stapled or paperclipped. Do not EVER fold the corners together as an attempt to fasten. It makes me crazy and is unacceptable. As in, I will take off half a point, as I will for unfastened multiple-page assignments. Really.

Your punctual attendance is expected, as is consistent preparation (reading and consideration of all assigned texts and prompts, if any). While we all have off days, and may be late, ill, or not fully prepared on a day or even two during the term, a tendency to be late, miss class, or be unprepared will adversely affect your grade. Your respectful, informed participation in class discussion is also expected. This does not mean that you must agree with everything everyone says, or understand everything you read before class, or speak at length every class session. It does mean that you must address your classmates, and me, politely and refrain from explicit or implicit personal attacks, insults, or intimidations as we discuss various topics and traditions, some controversial. Sometimes, your participation will begin

with admitting that you just didn't understand x, and a plea for clarification. This is absolutely fine. So long as you have read the material, put real effort into deciphering it and figuring out how it fits with what we're discussing, and [this is important] looked up the meanings of words you don't understand, honest confusion is not a bad thing, and the odds are that you are not alone in your bafflement. You should bear in mind that attempting to substitute our discussions and my lectures for reading will not only be obvious in class and cost you points, but will also leave you woefully unprepared for exams. Skipping class, or sleeping through it, and attempting to substitute reading for listening, participating, and taking notes, will have the same undesirable results.

Please do not speak just to exercise your vocal cords, or to attempt to impress, or to proselytize. This will not get you any points, but will just annoy me and the rest of the class. On the subject of annoying the rest of us: you may not, barring a special circumstance arising from a documented disability, use electronic devices in class. Every time you do so, you lose points. Big time. Don't set your devices to vibrate, or to ring in the supposedly too-high-for-fogies-to-hear tone. Turn them off/silence them and put them away when you walk into the room. There are two exceptions, one incredibly rare. First, each class period, I will ask one of you to silence your phone but keep it visible in case of text alerts through the campus emergency system. Second, if you are, for instance, someone's birthing coach, and waiting for the call that labor has begun, or you are on an organ transplant list and waiting to be beeped to come to the hospital, you should, of course, keep your phone on and handy. If something along those lines is going on, and you must be reachable, warn me before class.

You may reach me outside of class by coming to office hours, or by email. I promise to check email at least once every day that we meet as a class. Meaning, if I'm out sick, or snowed in, or it's the weekend/a holiday, I may check, but I may not. If something urgent has come up that requires you to miss class or whatever, a truly urgent situation will be just as convincing when you tell me after that fact, so stop worrying and deal with whatever it is. If you are confused about something that's coming due, you can and should check with your classmates to see if you just missed some key instruction/factoid if you don't hear from me as soon as you would like. 'You didn't respond to me in time' is never, ever, an acceptable excuse for failure to do an assignment, or for turning it in late.

Checking with your classmates is also your first, best, recourse when you must miss a class. I will not provide notes, or give you any lecture I gave in class in your absence. You are responsible, regardless of your presence or absence, for everything covered in class, including any changes to assignments/due dates, as well as for all of the assigned readings.

Schedule published separately.