

REL 130: Introduction to Religions

Spring 2012: DePauw University

JSC 159

MWF 1:40-2:40

Beth Benedix

Office: 214 Emison

Office Hours: Th 10-12, F 10-12 and by appointment

Office Phone: x 6386

Email: bbenedix@depauw.edu

Required Texts:

Prothero, *God is Not One*

Smith, *The World's Religions*

Smart and Hecht, *Sacred Texts of the World: A Universal Anthology* (recommended)

Course Description:

"... but this sentiment [that all religions are one], however well-intentioned, is neither accurate nor ethically responsible. God is not one. Faith in the unity of religions is just that—faith (perhaps even a kind of fundamentalism). And the leap that gets us there is an act of the hyperactive imagination... we know in our bones that the world's religions are different from one another... We pretend these differences are trivial because it makes us feel safer, or more moral. But pretending that the world's religions are the same does not make our world safer. Like all forms of ignorance, it makes our world more dangerous. What we need on this furiously religious planet is a realistic view of where religious rivals clash and where they can cooperate."

--Steven Prothero, *God is Not One*

"Religion alive confronts the individual with the most momentous option life can present. It calls the soul to the highest adventure it can undertake, a proposed journey across the jungles, peaks and deserts of the human spirit. The call is to confront reality, to master the self. Those who dare to hear and follow that secret call soon lean the dangers and difficulties of its lonely journey."

--Huston Smith, *The World's Religions*

Two rather different tones, yes? Both renowned scholars of religion, Steven Prothero and Huston Smith couldn't approach their subject more differently. The first is a call to realism, the second to idealism. The first asks us to look into how religion behaves in the world, what it *does*, who it helps, who it hurts. The second asks us to consider how religion provides an expression of how the world *ought to be*. While Prothero in some ways pits these two approaches against one another in his book, arguing that realism trumps idealism, we're going to assume that they form two sides of the same coin.

It's fair to say that a general pattern in the development of religious traditions is the tension (sometimes productive, sometimes, well, painful) between the individual and the collective. On one hand, each religious tradition we'll encounter raises and attempts to answer basic existential questions about what it means to be human, about what happens in the course of an individual human life, about how we should strive to live; on another, each tradition also develops elaborate institutions and governing bodies that seek to define, direct, and enforce a code of behavior. The business of religion is both intensely personal and intensely political, and we will use this semester to explore how these two spheres fit (or don't fit) together.

This type of course comes with a built-in disclaimer: it is important to recognize that *no religious tradition is monolithic*; therefore, it is both impossible and irresponsible to reduce a tradition to a single text, doctrine, or interpretation. While we are moving so quickly through such vast and rich traditions, we should bear in mind that there is much, much more to explore than our short sessions will allow. It is my goal and my hope that this type of survey—by no means exhaustive—will open up windows to beliefs and traditions you may not have been exposed to before, and that, after this course, you might revisit and spend more time in some of these places.

Expectations and Requirements:

The most important expectation I have of you (which also happens to be the most basic requirement) is that you come to class prepared, with an open mind, and ready for an engaged and lively discussion. Discussion really is the most crucial component to honing and refining your own interpretations and understanding of the traditions we will be encountering—rather than passive recipients of the one “right” interpretation of each tradition, your role in this class is to be active participants in uncovering multiple meanings of the pieces we address. I expect your questions, concerns, and even confusion with the material to be our starting point for discussion. A rule of thumb in this class: Speak up often and without reserve—each one of you has something unique and worthwhile to bring to our discussion.

As mentioned above, the history of religious development describes a push-and-pull between individual and collective. Therefore, it seems fitting that the kind of work you will be doing in this class will place you in both contexts: as an individual, grappling with the material on your own terms, and as part of a group, attempting to merge multiple approaches and opinions. In addition to **three short exams** (I will provide a study guide for these), you will be asked to participate in a **Facebook discussion**, and to do **two group presentations** (described below) and a **final, collaborative project** (in which you will create your own religion. I will give you more comprehensive guidelines later on in the semester). All three projects/presentations will include an **individual write-up**.

Facebook Discussion:

A Facebook group has been set up for our course. Please search for **REL 130: Intro to Religions (Benedix)**, and send a friend request. By midnight Friday each week, please post your thoughts/questions/concerns about the week’s material. You may also use this as a place to share interesting and relevant links to the material.

Group Presentations:

1) Look Where We Worship

In the opening line to his collection of poetry, *The Lord And The New Creatures*, Jim Morrison (yes! *The Jim Morrison*) writes: “Look where we worship.” He then proceeds to turn his critical and unwavering eye on all manner of things, from cinema to celebrity, drugs to death. None of these things is inherently “religious,” but his use of the term “worship” challenges us as readers to consider his choice of topics through this lens.

Using the famed “Lizard King” as inspiration, **the goal of the presentation is this: to explore the patterns of what we might call “religious thinking” in a non-religious context.** To serve as our basic blueprint for what we might call “religious thinking,” check out Smith, pages 92-94 (here he describes the “six aspects of religion [that] surface so regularly as to suggest that their seeds are in the human makeup: namely, authority, ritual, speculation, tradition, grace, and

mystery). Here's what you need to do: First, identify a non-religious event, tradition or cultural phenomenon. This event, tradition, or cultural phenomenon can be just about anything (for instance: the Republican debates, Occupy Wall Street, Facebook, other forms of social media, a tv show, video game, movie, bumper sticker, sports event, musical trend, fashion trend, etc.). **In your presentation, you should make the argument that whatever it is you've chosen to focus on serves a religious function for its audience members.** To do this, you'll want to consider how your event/tradition/cultural phenomenon meets (or doesn't meet) the criteria Smith outlines. You'll also want to think in terms of Berger's theory of legitimation—the narratives that tell us about what the world is and what it ought to be, and how these narratives go about reminding us—in symbolic ways—about why we think things are and ought to be this way. What sorts of needs does it fulfill? How does it provide meaning to the people who find it meaningful? As you do this, you will want to be *very specific* about the ways your chosen event, tradition or phenomenon goes about reminding its audience about what they hold dear (you will want, in other words, to very carefully deconstruct the specific symbolism of your chosen event, tradition or phenomenon).

Some guidelines:

- Your presentation should be 15 minutes
- Groups will consist of 2-3 members
- Presentations will take place every Friday (except for exam days)
- The more interactive, engaging and high energy, the better. Get us thinking, talking, arguing!
- Individual write-ups (2-3 pages) are due by 8:00 pm the day of your presentation. Write-ups should include your own interpretation of the presentation. I want to hear how you fit into this, what part did you play, what conversations did you have in the process of putting the presentation together? This is the place to flesh out and expand anything that may not have made it into the presentation.

2) Mini-Presentation

The purpose of this presentation is to broaden our discussion of the religious traditions to a **more practical understanding of the ways these traditions function and are expressed in popular culture.** We will dedicate the last day of each unit to mini-presentations on several of the following subjects: 1) Education and Evangelizing, 2) Institutional Governance, 3) Structures of Power and Political Involvement, 4) Violence and/or Peace-Building. There will be two presentations for each religious tradition. The two groups will be responsible for talking with one another beforehand and deciding which group will cover which topic(s) (you don't need to cover all 4 topics; each group should take one or two on as its focus).

Some guidelines:

- Your presentation should be 25-30 minutes
- Groups will consist of 2-3 members
- All members of the group should contribute equally to the presentation
- Your presentation should be *interactive*. In other words, you should aim to get us talking, thinking, arguing, whatever, about the material you are presenting to us. The best presentation will be one that is engaging and lively. So, give us the information, but give it to us so that we can quickly digest it and then enter into discussion about it. Come prepared with a set of open-ended questions about your topic that will guide us to an

understanding of what makes this topic so timely and relevant. Come prepared with your own confusion, bewilderment, curiosity, fascination, sympathy, etc. with your topic and be ready to communicate this to us. And then step back and let us communicate our thoughts to you. Don't do a Power Point presentation unless you are prepared to go well beyond a bullet point treatment of your ideas.

- The internet and on-line newspaper archives are your friend (in this particular case, if not necessarily in others). So is YouTube, believe it or not. Cast the net wide and see what you find.
- Individual write-ups (1-2 pages) due 8:00 pm the evening of the presentation

Grades will be determined **approximately** like this: short exams 45% (15% each), LWWW (15%), Mini-presentation (15%), Final project (15%), Facebook discussion (10%)

**** Please don't hesitate to come to my office hours if you have **any** questions or concerns. The door is always open.

Course Schedule

Jan	30	M	Intro to course: What is religion? What does it do?
Feb	1	W	Thumbnail sketch of Berger (on Moodle); Prothero, 1-24
	3	F	LWWW Discuss "One" (On reserve in Roy O. West)

Hinduism

6	M	Life Goals, Stages and Limitations Smith, 13-26, 50-54, Prothero, 130-138 Smart and Hecht, 213-216, 192-193
8	W	Indus Valley Civilization, Vedic Tradition, Caste Prothero, 138-143, Smith, 55-59 Smart and Hecht, 181-186, 213
10	F	LWWW Gita, Yoga, Philosophical vs. Devotional Smith, 26-41, Prothero 144-152, 159-162 Smart and Hecht, 218-222, 193-195, 197-199
13	M	Modern Hinduism, Devotional and Puja Prothero, 157-159, 164-168 Smart and Hecht, 211-212, 229-230
15	W	mini-presentations

Buddhism

17	F	LWWW Story of the Buddha Smith, 82-112, Prothero, 169-174 Smart and Hecht, 233-238, 251
20	M	Basic Buddhist Concepts Smith, 112-119, Prothero, 177-186 Smart and Hecht, 242-245
22	W	Theravada and Mahayana Smith, 119-127, Prothero, 186-190

	24	F	Smart and Hecht, 255, 272-274 LWWW Pure Land, Thunderbolt and Diamond Smith, 139-149, Prothero, 196-198 Smart and Hecht, 265-270, 254-255
	27	M	mini-presentations
**	29	W	short exam #1
			<i>Taoism and Confucianism</i>
Mar	2	F	LWWW Confucius Smith, 154-172, Prothero, 101-115 Smart and Hecht, 306-309
	5	M	Teachings Smith, 172-187, Prothero, 115-130 Smart and Hecht, 309-316
	7	W	Lao-tze and the Tao Te Ching Smith, 196-197, Prothero, 279-303 Smart and Hecht, 292-297
	9	F	LWWW Forms of Taoism, Wu-wei Prothero, 303-315 Smart and Hecht, 297-302
			<i>Zen Buddhism</i>
	12	M	Smith, 128-139 Prothero, 190-196 Smart and Hecht,
	14	W	mini-presentations
**16	16	F	short exam #2
			<i>Judaism</i>
	20	M	Covenant, Biblical vs. Modern Judaism Prothero, 243-250 Smart and Hecht, 45-52, 59-60, 71-72
	22	W	Exile, Return, Law Prothero, 251-262 57-58, 79-80, 84-85, 87-88
	24	F	LWWW Ritual, Reform Prothero., 262-270 Smart and Hecht, 53-57, 69-71, 73-75
			**** Spring Break: March 25 to April 1 ****
Apr	2	M	Reconstructionism, Zionism, Mysticism Prothero, 270-278 Smart and Hecht, 81-84, 76-79
	4	W	mini-presentations
			<i>Christianity</i>

6	F	LWWW Historical Jesus and Early Teachings Smith, 317-339, Prothero, 65-73 Smart and Hecht, 94-97, 109 118-122
9	M	Early Church and Reformations Smith, 339-363, Prothero, 74-82 Smart and Hecht, 111, 114-116
11	W	Evangelicism, Mormonism, Pentacostalism Prothero, 82-91 Smart and Hecht, 119-123
13	F	LWWW Brown Christians, Christianity and Islam, Mysticism Prothero, 96-99
16	M	mini-presentations
		<i>Islam</i>
18	W	Muhammad and Qur'an Smith, 221-235, Prothero, 25-31, 36-49 Smart and Hecht, 130-141, 166-167
20	F	LWWW Five Pillars Smith, 235-248, Prothero, 31-34 Smart and Hecht, 150-158
23	M	Social Teachings, Jihad Smith, 248-257, Prothero, 34-36 Smart and Hecht, 160-164
25	W	Shariah, Sunni and Shia, Islamism, Progressive Muslims Prothero, 49-57 Smart and Hecht, 146-149, 172-173
27	F	LWWW Sufism Smith, 257-266, Prothero, 57-63 Rumi readings (on Moodle)
30	M	mini-presentations
May 2	W	review for exam
** 4	F	short exam #3

Atheism

7	M	Prothero, 317-329
9	W	Discuss "Religulous"

****sometime this week: watch "Religulous" outside of class**

Final Project/Presentations: Saturday, May 12, 8:30-11:30