

Course Title: Religious Studies and the Quest for Meaning

Faculty Name: Prof. Liora Gubkin

Institution: California State University, Bakersfield

Semester Taught: Winter 2009

Course description:

A comparative study of the variety of ways persons have experienced and interpreted religion. Topics may include: religious experience, God, faith, salvation and liberation, religious mythology and art, ritual, ethics, and the effect of religion on diverse societies in the modern world.

Student learning outcomes:

In RS 100, we will study multiple meanings of religion and spirituality and what it is to be religious, from an academic perspective. The purposes of this course are: (1) To provide a comparative study of the way people express themselves religiously/spiritually; (2) To promote students' skills of empathetic understanding and critical reading, writing, and reflection. Upon successful completion of the course, students will be able to:

- Identify tools and methods for studying religion as an outsider to traditions;
- Understand how people in a variety of religious traditions make meaning for themselves through religious beliefs and practices;
- Understand interactions between religion, culture, and society;
- Critically reflect upon their own experiences of religion and spirituality from a comparative, historical, and philosophical perspective;
- Employ their critical reading and writing skills toward the study of religion.

Despite the ways in which religion can serve and has always served violence and repression, at its best it can preserve and advance a wisdom that truly does surpass human understanding: wisdom to persist in virtue whose consequences we cannot see and despite voices insisting that virtue is illusory or futile. . . . religion is the surest, most ancient assembly of wisdom about the human experience.

—Catherine M. Wallace

General Education Courses:

The goals of general education are accomplished jointly through the General Education Program, major and minor programs, and other graduation requirements. The goals include the following:

1. develop and reinforce basic skills in writing, speaking, and listening in the English language, in critical thinking and logical reasoning, and in quantitative reasoning;
2. provide students with a breadth of exposure to mathematics, life and physical sciences, arts and humanities, and social and behavioral sciences;
3. provide students with an in-depth exposure to themes of importance in the modern world- natural science and technology, arts and humanities, and social and behavioral sciences;
4. assist students in the process of becoming well-informed and responsible citizens;
5. increase students' understanding of human diversity and their tolerance for differences of perceptions, ideas and values;
6. give students an international and multicultural perspective on issues and problems confronting human society and the natural world; and
7. facilitate the process of ethical development and responsibility at the personal, interpersonal, and societal levels.

Required Texts:

- Ari Goldman, *The Search for God at Harvard*
- William Elliott, *Tying Rocks to Clouds: Meetings and Conversations with Wise and Spiritual People*
- Liora Gubkin, ed. *RS 100 Course Reader* (available from Reprographics/Print Shop)

Course Requirements (Assignment details will be posted on WebCT):

Reading assignments and hmwk: You should complete the reading assignment before class in order to fully participate in class discussion. Several assignments from the course reader are accompanied by homework questions, which are posted in the homework folder on WebCT. On those days, your homework assignment is due *at the beginning of class. Homework must be typed.* Each homework is worth 5 points, and to earn full credit, you need to do the assignment fully. Expect to type 1-2 pages (12 point, Times New Roman, double-spaced with one-inch margins). There will be no make-ups for late homework assignments unless arrangements are made in advance.

Films and viewing questions: The films are an integral part of this course and are intended to promote further reflection and class discussion. Viewing questions are posted on WebCT. Films with library call numbers in brackets after the title are available for viewing in the library. Films without call numbers are my own or belong to colleagues and will not be loaned. Some films are also available for viewing through WebCT. All library films for the course are on two-hour closed reserve. Questions will be collected in class on film viewing days and cannot be made up unless arrangements are made in advance.

Exams: Exams will include multiple choice, true-false, matching, and essay questions.

Papers: You will write two short papers in this class: one in conjunction with the unit on spirituality, and one at the end of the quarter on your response to the question, "What is Religion?"

Poster Sessions: You will have the opportunity to work your classmates this quarter on two projects. As part of our "meetings and conversations with wise and spiritual people," students will research people interviewed by William Elliott in *Tying Rocks to Clouds*. Toward the end of the quarter, students will work in groups to explore the vast religious landscape of Bakersfield and visit local religious communities. In each case, groups will share their findings during a poster session.

Grades:

You may earn a total of 500 points during the course not including extra credit.

Exams (2)	150
Papers (2)	150
Poster Sessions (2)	125
Viewing Questions (8)	25
Reading Homework (10)	50
TOTAL	500

Points conversion:

A	=	465-500	C+	=	385-399
A-	=	450-464	C	=	365-384
B+	=	435-449	C-	=	350-364
B	=	415-434	D	=	300-349
B-	=	400-414	F	=	<300

Extra credit opportunities may be offered to the entire class at various times during the quarter. Please do not ask for individual extra credit assignments as these would place your classmates at an unfair disadvantage. To receive extra credit for an approved event, send a one paragraph e-mail about the event, including what you learned from the experience, within 48 hours of the event to me through WebCT. Extra credit will move your grade up one step if you are on the border between two grades.

Academic Integrity: Academic integrity and honesty is required. Cheating of any type will, *at a minimum*, result in a "zero" for that exam or assignment. Plagiarism will result in an "F" for the course and a notation on your permanent record for a first offense. Please familiarize yourself with the section on Academic Integrity in the CSUB Catalog. If you have any questions about what constitutes plagiarism, I urge you to meet with me, one of the TAs, or a tutor from OASIS before you submit any written work. I will be using www.turnitin.com to control for plagiarism for both papers. I do not seriously believe that many of you will plagiarize. Because plagiarism is very widespread on-campus, however, you will be required to submit your written work to turnitin.com by 11:30 p.m. on the day that it is due. I recommend you write your paper in Microsoft Word because that is the easiest to upload. Each of you needs to set up a student profile at www.turnitin.com. This is not difficult. Go to the site and click on "Create a user profile"; choose student, and then follow the instructions. You need to create your profile BEFORE the assignment is due. So, I suggest that you do it soon. In order to create the user profile, you will need the following information:

Incompletes and Withdrawing from the Course:

- You may withdraw from the course through January 28 for any reason. After this, you may withdraw through February 25 if you have a "serious and compelling reason." University policy, in theory, prevents withdrawal from a single course in the last three weeks of class. If you seek an exception to this policy, speak with me.
- Important Note: Because this withdrawal policy is fair, and because I think Incompletes almost always work to the student's detriment, I am very disinclined to give them. I will grant them only under the following conditions: (1) You must have been keeping up with the work (and receiving a "C" or better) prior to (2) something unusual and beyond your control occurring that prevents you from completing the assignment(s) or the course at the present time.

Attendance: If you must miss class, inform me via WebCT. If you will be absent due to religious holidays or participation in CSUB sponsored activities (athletics, theater, debate, music, etc.), you must meet with me the first week of the quarter. Much of our learning will happen when we discuss ideas with each other; when one person doesn't attend class, we all miss out.

Classroom Decorum: Come on time; come prepared. Be respectful of your instructor and fellow classmates. We are here for a common purpose. Let's create an atmosphere where everyone can learn. You will be expected to participate. You can expect to be called upon; you are welcome to pass,

although you are strongly encouraged to contribute. Our classroom should be a safe space for thoughtful opinions to be shared; if I feel you are violating that space you will be asked to leave.

Digital Classroom Decorum:

Please—as they say on airplanes—turn off and stow **ALL** electronic devices:

- No cellphones, iPhones, iPods, etc.
- If you plan to use a laptop, please get my permission.
- If you're awaiting **an emergency call**, let me know before class.

WebCT: You are responsible for familiarizing yourself with all the content on the site. This is also where you can view your grades throughout the quarter. I strongly encourage you check regularly to verify that your grades have been recorded correctly.

We will communicate with each other outside of the classroom mainly in person during office hours and through the email client on the course website. Therefore, you should check your email on the course website at least every evening. If you wish, you can forward your email from WebCT to your personal e-mail account. However, you are responsible for all communication via the email client on the course website, even if your mail does not forward properly. For example, if you forward your email to another server, but that server filters the message, you remain responsible for the content of that message.

A WebCT ID is the only means of accessing your WebCT course(s). Your WebCT ID is the same as your MyCSUB Username. If you do not know your MyCSUB Username, or are unable to login to WebCT, contact me ASAP @ 654-2314. After logging in, set up the WebCT login hint, so that a password can be emailed to you, in the event that you forget your password.

SSD: Students working with the Office for Students with Disabilities are responsible for submitting their accommodation letter to me. Please schedule a meeting with me at the beginning of the quarter.

Course Schedule:

UNIT 1, PRELIMINARIES: THE ACADEMIC STUDY OF RELIGION

Wednesday, January 7

Topic: Syllabus; Studying others and ourselves

Film: *Baraka*

Friday, January 9

Topic: What is religion and how should we study it? Take One

Reading: CR, "Approaching Religious Traditions" from *Introducing World Religions*; reading hmwk 1

Monday, January 12

Topic: What is religion and how should we study it? Take Two

Reading: CR, ""Who am I? Who are we? The search for identity" from *Religion: A Search for Meaning*; reading hmwk 2

Wednesday, January 14

Topic: Insider and outsider perspectives – problems and possibilities

Reading: Goldman, pp. 1-8; Film: *In Her Own Time* (begin)

Friday, January 16

Topic: Insider and outsider perspectives – problems and possibilities (continued)

Film: *In Her Own Time* (conclude); [viewing questions 1](#)

Monday, January 19. NO CLASS

In celebration and commemoration of Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday: a) read “Letter from Birmingham Jail” and/or b) attend an event in honor of the day. Post your response on the discussion board for possible five additional points toward final grade.

UNIT 2, THE BIG QUESTIONS

Wednesday, January 21

Topic: Theodicy, What do we do when bad things happen to good people?

Reading: Goldman, pp. 11-24; CR, “Explaining Evil”; [reading hmwk 3](#)

Friday, January 23

Topic: A personal quest for answers; Poster Session instructions

Reading: *Tying Rocks to Clouds* pp. 1-25

Monday, January 26

Topic: Thinking with “wise and spiritual people”

Reading: *Tying Rocks to Clouds* interviews with Kubler-Ross, Dass, Kushner, Schuller, the Dalai Lama, and Mother Teresa

Wednesday, January 28

Group Meetings for Poster Session

Friday, January 30

Topic: Thinking with “wise and spiritual people” (continued)

Reading: *Tying Rocks to Clouds* interviews with Schachter-Shalomi, Khan, Kornfield, Satchidananda, Vaughan, and Steindl-Rast; [reading hmwk 4](#)

Monday, February 2: Poster Session

UNIT 3, ORTHODOXY AND ORTHOPRAXY (“Christian Creed and Jewish Deed”)

Wednesday, February 4

Topic: Christian creed – a history of religions approach

Reading: Goldman, pp. 27-40; CR, “The Arian Controversy and the Council of Nicea”; “The Pagan Reaction” and “Athanasius of Alexandria”; [reading hmwk 5](#)

Friday, February 6

Topic: Jewish deed – reading sacred texts

Reading: CR, “Exodus 2-14” and “The Passover Haggadah”; [reading hmwk 6](#)

Monday, February 9

Topic: Jewish deed – a phenomenology of religions approach; exam review
Film: *Passover Traditions*; [viewing questions 2](#)

Wednesday, February 11: Midterm exam

UNIT 4, SPIRITUALITY and SPIRITUAL RESISTANCE

Friday, February 13

Film: *What Do You Believe?*; [viewing questions 3](#)

Monday, February 16

Topic: What is Spirituality? Introductory thoughts
Reading: Goldman, 43-63; CR, “Letter to a Friend”; “God is Inside You and Inside Everyone Else”
[reading hmwk 7](#)

Wednesday, February 18

Topic: What is Spirituality? – a psychology of religion approach
Reading: CR, “Understanding the Sacred”

Friday, February 20

Topic: Spirituality in Action
Reading: CR, “Gandhi, The Exemplar”; “The Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings of the Order of Interbeing”
Film: *Commemorating Passover in Concentration Camps*; [viewing questions 4](#)

Monday, February 23

Reading: CR, “The Exodus as a Personal Spiritual Journey”; [reading hmwk 8](#)

UNIT 5, RELIGIONS IN SOCIETY TODAY

Wednesday, February 25—Paper Due (bring to class and submit to turnitin.com)

Topic: One god, many gods; one religion, many religions; Poster Session instructions
Reading: Goldman, pp. 67-109

Friday, February 27

Topic: Many gods, one god – Seeing the Divine in Hinduism
Reading: CR, “Seeing the Sacred”; [reading hmwk 9](#)
Film: *Hinduism* BL1202 .H498 1996

Recommendation: Attend religious service this weekend.

Monday, March 2

Topic: The Dalai Lama – Life is Suffering, but Happiness is possible
Readings: Re-read “His Holiness the Dalai Lama” in *Tying Rocks to Clouds*;
Film: *Ten Questions for the Dalai Lama*; [viewing questions 5](#)

Wednesday, March 4

Topic: Religion in society, progressive voices on abortion

Reading: Goldman, pp. 113-149

Film: *Ten Things You Might Not Know about Abortion*; [viewing questions 6](#)

Friday, March 6

Topic: Religion in society, conservative voices on religion and politics

Reading: Goldman, pp. 153-216

Film: *God's Warriors*; [viewing questions 7](#)

Recommendation: Attend religious service this weekend if you haven't already.

Monday, March 9

Group Meetings for Poster Session

Wednesday, March 11

Topic: Muslims in America; Final Exam Instructions

Reading: Goldman, pp. 219-237; CR, "Around the Ka'ba and Over the Crick"

Film: *Islam rising. The Quran and the American dream* [BP67.U6I85 2000], [viewing questions 8](#)

Friday, March 13

Topic: Women and Religion – a feminist, theological approach; exam review

Reading: Goldman, pp. 241-248; CR, "Why Women Need the Goddess" [reading hmwk 10](#)

Recommended: Goldman, pp. 251-283

Monday, March 16: Poster Session

Final Exam: RS 100.1 (9:30 section), Friday, March 20, 8:00-10:30 a.m.

Final Exam: RS 100.2 (10:55 section), Wednesday, March 18, 11 a.m.-1:30 p.m.