"Rel 111: "Understanding Religious Experience and Expression"

Dr. Rennie

Students are recommended NOT to print out this syllabus as the contents may change during the semester. However, if you really need a print copy click these links for a pdf version of the schedule (5 pages) and a pdf version of the syllabus (18 pages).

Fall 2015

Religion 111 will meet on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday from 2:00 - 3:00 in Patterson Hall 105.

Office Hours: I will be available in Patterson Hall 336 Monday and Friday from 10:30 until 1:30, and Tuesday and Thursday from 12:30 until 1:30. Other times by arrangement.

The schedule of assignments, quizzes, etc. remains negotiable until Friday of week 9. Changes must be made before this date.

Week 1 - Introduction: the Academic Study of Religion

Mon. 8/31 Introduction to the course: the class description, D2L, textbook and handouts. A brief introduction to the academic study of religion.

(Note that required readings from the textbook are shown in blue. Other readings, usually provided as handouts on D2L or online, are shown in red).

Wed. 9/2 The Problem of Definition: terms and categories of the study as themselves providing models of religion.
Read Kripal (1-7): "Prehistory, Preparation, Perspective."
Fri. 9/4 Read Kripal (9-27): "Comparative Practices in Global History."
An introduction to the idea of "Dimensional Models" of religion and the "phenomenology" of religion.

Read Bryan Rennie, "Heterophenomenology as Self-Knowledge" (Handout on the My.Westminster page) over the weekend (it would be a good idea to get a start on Geertz's article, too).

Week 2 - The Academic Study of Religion, continued.

Mon. 9/7 Heterophenomenology and the Study of Religion

Fri. 9/11 Read Kripal (27-40): "Comparative Practices of Monotheism."

Week 3 - Religious Traditions: The Oral Traditions
See BigMyth.com for many of the world's traditional oral myths.

Read Kripal (43-58): "Western Origins and History of the Modern Practice" and the Native American myth, "The Story of Jumping Mouse."

Mon. 9/14 First short quiz.
Religious Narrative: The Story of Jumping Mouse.

Wed. 9/16 Read Kripal (58-74): "Colonialism and the Modern Births of Spirituality and Fundamentalism."

Fri. 9/18 First Essay Exam: (Defining Religion, Studying Religion, Oral Traditions--and how are we doing so far?)
Week 4 - Hinduism. Make sure you know the basic geography of India. See Maps of India

In fact, make sure you know the location of all of the countries involved. See these maps [1] & [2].

There will be a trip to the Sri Venkateswara temple in Penn Hills, Pittsburgh on Wednesday, September 23rd, leaving from the Patterson Hall car park about 4:30 and returning about 9:00 PM. Students are asked to dress respectfully.

Varnasramadharma - the blessed rage for order.

Mon. 9/21 Read Kripal (76-88): "The Skill of Reflexivity and Some Key Categories."

The Vedas and Varnasramadharma. The valid aims and stages of life.

Wed. 9/23 Read Kripal (89-102): "Working Definitions and Their Histories."


An Introduction to the BhagavadGita in the Mahabharata.

Week 5 - Hinduism, Continued. Introduction to Buddhism.

Mon. 9/28 Read Kripal (125-141): "Patterns in Ritual."
The Hindu Yogas.

Wed. 9/30 A discussion of Rajayoga: How can "heterophenomenology" be applied to Hinduism? Especially to Rajayoga?

The Buddhadharma - challenging tradition.
The Life of the Buddha (Powerpoint Handout on the My.Westminster page).

http://www.westminster.edu/staff/brennie/rel111sc.htm[8/10/15, 6:52:45 PM]
Week 6 - Buddhism continued.

Mon. 10/5 Read Kripal (154-174): "New Directions: Space Exploration, Dark Green Religion, and Popular Culture."
The Three Buddhist Canons and Buddhism in China.

Wed. 10/7 Video: Footprints of the Buddha.

Fri. 10/9 Read Kripal (177-192): "Sex and the Bodies of Religion."
Second Short Quiz (Oral Traditions, Hinduism and Buddhism).
Discussion: Is Theravada Buddhism a "religion?"

Week 7 - Chinese Religion

Mon. 10/12 Chinese Religion
See these maps (1) & (2).
San Chiao - Unity and Diversity.
Read Kripal (192-206): "Super Sexualities."
See also this note on transliteration and this map of China during the Han period.
The San Chiao; China's three traditions (Powerpoint Handout on the My.Westminster page) and See this website for Classical Chinese Scriptures: Introduction to Daoism.

Introduction to Confucianism.

Introduction to Chinese Buddhism (and a word about research)

Note that your term paper and MUST be determined by this time.
Please turn in a one paragraph statement of your topic and your thesis.

Week 8

Mon. 10/19 "Taoism: A Question of Balance" (Video).

Wed. 10/21 - Read Kripal (253-269): "The Comparative practices of Popular Culture."
Further Discussion of Chinese Religions and research and preparation for the second essay exam.


Mid-semester Break October 24th - 27th (Saturday to Tuesday)

Week 9 - Judaism

Wed. 10/28 Guest Speaker: Jonathan Solomon, a lay member of the Jewish Community in New Castle.

Fri. 10/30 Read Kripal (271-284): "The Final Questions of Souls, Salvation, and the End of All Things."

Week 10 - Religion and the Arts.

Mon. 11/2 Read Kripal (284-297): "Traumatic Technologies of the Soul."
Religion and the Arts: Perceiving the Sacred in the Profane. The art of Christianity.

Wed. 11/4 Read Kripal (299-313): "Putting it All Together Again: Faithful Re-readings."
Art in Other Religions.

Fri. 11/6 Read Kripal (313-333): "Excluding the Other Religious Worldview."
Third Short Quiz (Judaism, Religion and Art).

Week 11 - The History of Religion in the Ancient Mediterranean World.

See these documents on The Greco-Roman Context (Link on the My.Westminster page), Greek and Roman
Mysteries, and Mithraism and Gnosticism.

Mon. 11/9 The Mystery Religions, Mithraism, and Gnosticism.

Wed. 11/11 Zoroastrianism: the religion of the Persian Empire.


You are required to turn in a working bibliography for your paper at the end of next week. This must contain at least five properly documented sources, written up in the style required by the notes on the essay.

Week 12 - Introduction to the Study of Christianity.

Mon. 11/16 Read Kripal (335-348): "Rational Re-readings: Masters of Suspicion, Classical and Contemporary."

The Jesus of history and the Christ of faith.

See also the PBS Frontline website From Jesus to Christ.

Wed. 11/18 Christianity in History: the successful spread of the early Church. See "Early Christian Growth.doc" (Handout on the My.Westminster page)

Fri. 11/20 No Class. Prof Rennie will be attending the Annual American Academy of Religion (AAR) Conference in Atlanta.

On-line assignment #1: Read Kripal (348-362): "Postcolonial Theory: The Gaze of Empire."

Consider this: whether you are an "insider" or an "outsider," you came into this course with some assumptions about Christianity and/or Christians. Have your assumptions been confirmed, called into question, or unaffected by the treatments of topics such as "the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith," the spread of Christianity, Christian "denominations" or "branches," and Christian sacraments? Write a response to these questions totaling 1,000 words (you should always cite the specific data on which your responses are based).
Your working bibliography is also due today (Friday 20th) and should be sent by e-mail. This must contain at least five properly documented sources, written up in the style required by the notes on the essay.

Week 13 - Christianity concluded.

Mon. 11/23 No Class (AAR). On-line assignment #2: Find out all that you can about The Five Pillars of Islam and Principles of Islamic Theology and try to discover their bases in the sacred texts. See this searchable database.

Thanksgiving Break Wednesday November 25th to Sunday November 29th

Week 14 - Islam.

Mon. 11/30 Third Essay Exam: Judaism, Graeco-Roman Religion, and Christianity).

Wed. 12/2 Read Kripal (365-379): "Reflexive Re-readings: Looking at the Looker."
The History of Islam: The Prophet and the Book. The Caliphate and the origins of the Sunni/Shia division.


Week 15- Islam Continued

Mon. 12/7 Read Kripal (397-411): "... and Cosmos."
Today is your last chance to have a rough draft of your paper checked.

Wed. 12/9 Dr. Ahmad Abul-Ela, a member of the local Muslim community will visit the class today.

Fri. 12/11 The last class. Heterophenomenology and Islam. Your paper is due in today (as an e-mail attachment, by 4:30).
Explanation of the Final Examination.
Student Assessments of the course.
I will hand out the take-home final in this class.
The Completed take-home final examination may be handed in as an e-mail attachments anytime before the deadline, but you must await a positive response from me that I have received your paper before you assume that I have got it, because I will not accept any excuses whatsoever for final exams that have been somehow lost.

The deadline for the take-home final is 4:30 PM on Thursday, 17th.
They can be submitted earlier.
Finals period Monday 12/14 to Thursday 12/18.
Term ends Friday 12/18.