

Introduction to the Study of Religion

Religion Unbounded
REL 120 | Spring 2017

Who is teaching our course?

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What is our course about?

What do we talk about when we talk about religion? Our course is about this question and our responses to it. As we shape and reshape our responses, we will ponder other, related questions. How does religion work? What does religion do? Why does religion matter? Is religion necessary? Is religion beneficial? Can religion go too far? What happens if it does?

Underlying these questions is a methodological question: *how?* How do we talk about what we talk about when we talk about religion? And, implicitly, how do we study religion? In our course, we will perform, and reflect on, ways of responding to this methodological question as we respond to our course's guiding question. In other words, in our course we will *do* religious studies.

We will *do* the study of religion by studying religion: in 2 extended case studies, turning on 2 texts from different times and traditions. To do so, we will engage many other texts, many different methods and theories, about religion. So our course will be an engaged, dynamic practicum—a learning experiment in how we study religion—rather than only a distanced consideration of how others have studied religion.

What do we hope to gain from our course?

Our course materials, discussions, and activities work together in the service of our course's learning goals:

- (1) to understand and articulate how religion works, what religion does, and why religion matters in individual and collective, past and present contexts;
- (2) to analyze and interpret religious materials and experiences and their forms of expression using a variety of approaches and methods;
- (3) to recognize and describe the difficulties and possibilities of studying religion as a mode of humanistic inquiry;
- (4) to develop and practice critical and self-critical habits of reading, thinking, and writing.

What skills will we develop?

Critical reading, thinking, and writing skills are probably the most important and most applicable skills you can learn in college. Because they are skills, they are learnable. But like any skill, they require practice. They can be learned, and ultimately mastered, if you are willing to devote time and effort to practicing them. Think of these critical skills as investments that require large initial deposits but that provide substantial returns with interest on those deposits.

What will we read?

Euripides, *Bacchae* (9780941051422)

Peter Shaffer, *Equus* (9780743287302)

Additional texts will be available on Blackboard. Be sure to bring to class a paper copy of each text we are discussing that day.

How is our course organized?

At heart, our course is a series of conversations: among our course materials and among ourselves. Our class meetings stage these conversations as live opportunities for interactive learning, with as many conversation partners as possible. Our course is *ours*, not only mine or yours. It is our responsibility to engage in these ongoing conversations with the materials and one another.