

**The University of Alabama
Department of Religious Studies
Spring 2004**

Religion 101

**INTRODUCTION TO RELIGIOUS STUDIES:
WESTERN APPROACHES TO THE PROBLEM OF EVIL**

207 Manly Hall, Tuesday and Thursday from 9:30 – 10:45 a.m.

Instructor: Dr. Catherine M. Roach, Assistant Professor of New College
and Religious Studies
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Office Hours: Mondays, 9-11 a.m., Fridays 9-10 a.m., or other times by appointment

Course Description:

The academic study of religion consists of many different sub-fields. These sub-fields are various theoretical and methodological approaches from which to study religion. No one approach gives us a complete understanding on its own, but each is necessary to build a rich and complex understanding of religion. Some of these approaches include: historical, philosophical, comparative, feminist, African-American, literary, anthropological, sociological, and psychological. They result in the sub-fields: history of religion, philosophy of religion, comparative religion, women and religion, African-American religious thought, religion and the arts, anthropology of religion, sociology of religion, and psychology of religion.

This course introduces you to Religious Studies by surveying four of these different approaches. We will look at how each addresses the problem of evil. We focus on evil in order to narrow the otherwise vast topic of religion and because evil is one of the most challenging and painful problems of religious reflection. How do these various sub-fields in Religious Studies explore this core issue? From their differing perspectives, what is the relation of religion to problems of good and evil? How do these approaches explain why innocent people suffer and how we should respond? In their analyses, is religion itself ever an "evil"?

Through readings, lectures, discussions, and assignments, the course highlights the interdisciplinary breadth of Religious Studies (one reason I majored in it!) and the field's flexibility in exploring complex questions of value and meaning. The course focuses on the Western tradition and mainly Christianity.

Objectives of Course:

- to introduce you to the breadth and variety of Religious Studies as an interdisciplinary field especially suited to exploration of complex issues of value and meaning. You will become acquainted with some basic vocabulary, concepts, theories, and historical developments within Religious Studies.
- to reflect in a sustained, critical, self-conscious manner on the problem of evil--long a central concern of religion--from a variety of perspectives.
- to aid you in developing your own ideas about the academic study of religion and the problem of evil through constant questioning, sound argument, careful reading, and sympathetic consideration of the arguments of others.
- to develop an appreciation of the complexity of thought and of the variety of positions and interpretive strategies in the questions the course pursues.
- generally, to further develop your analytic, critical, and imaginative skills in reading, writing, and discussion.

Questions We Will Explore:

- what are some of the different methodological and theoretical approaches adopted in the academic study of religion?
- how do these approaches explore the problem of evil?
- how do differences in the sub-fields' methods or theoretical assumptions shape differences in their explorations and conclusions?

How We Will Approach Objectives and Questions:

The course starts with an introduction and is then divided into four units, each devoted to the problem of evil investigated from a different sub-field:

- I. psychology and religion
- II. women and religion (religion and feminism)
- III. religion and the arts
- IV. African-American religious thought

Key texts are assigned for each unit. Lectures and class discussion cover the readings, background issues, and your responses, which are actively solicited in the discussions and writing assignments. These assignments, spaced throughout the term, provide opportunities for you to further your understanding of the material and to develop your own ideas.

How You Will Be Evaluated:

Eighty percent of your course grade is based on four short essays (20% each, 3-5 pages, carefully written, double-spaced, typed). The essays are due at the end of each course unit, on the Religious Studies sub-field of that unit. Guide questions for the essays will be handed out in advance, or you may develop your own topic in consultation with me. I will also hand out information explaining grading criteria.

The final 20% of your grade comes from the take-home final exam (3-5 pages), which will invite you to synthesize your learning from the course as a whole and will let you evaluate how your thinking may have changed as a result of it.

Notes on Requirements:

- Attendance is mandatory. Our class sessions provide the understanding and material necessary for you to write the essays, so missing class will negatively affect your grade.
- Reading the assignments is mandatory and crucial since most lectures and discussion will center on these texts. The essay topics are also drawn from the texts and our interpretations of them. I will distribute handouts guiding you on the reading assignments.
- There may be occasional 1-page response papers or quizzes assigned throughout the term, if needed to ensure you do the reading. (I hope this strategy will not be necessary.)
- Class discussions are central to how this course will proceed. Come prepared with comments and questions. Good class discussion is not a series of questions and answers between students and a professor, but is a sustained, wide-ranging yet focused, fun, collective inquiry. Participation involves *attentive listening* as well as talking. You can learn much from each other. Listen respectfully to your student colleagues; respond to their questions; build on their comments.
- Consistent attendance and effort, good class participation, and improvement over the term can all help to boost otherwise lower grades.

Other Policies:

- Academic honesty is expected of all students. All acts of dishonesty (plagiarism, cheating) in any work constitute academic misconduct. The Academic Misconduct Disciplinary Policy will be followed in the event of academic misconduct.
- If you have needs related to a disability, please contact Disabilities Services (348-4285). After initial arrangements are made with that office, I will be happy to accommodate you. If you have any other special concerns, please contact me about the situation.

Required Readings:

Texts at the bookstore:

Sigmund Freud, The Future of an Illusion, paperback ed., ed. and trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton).

Fyodor Dostoevsky, The Grand Inquisitor, with related chapters from The Brothers Karamazov, ed. Charles B. Guignon, trans. Constance Garnett (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1993).

In the Sourcebook:

Carl G. Jung, Answer to Job, paperback ed., trans. by R. F. C. Hull, Bollingen Series (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), pp. ix-xv (prefatory materials), pp. 1-24 (chs. 1-2).

Valerie Saiving, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View," in WomanSpirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion, ed. Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow (HarperSanFrancisco, 1992 [1979]), pp. 25-42.

Nel Noddings, Women and Evil (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), pp. 35-58 (ch. 2).

William R. Jones, Is God a White Racist? A Preamble to Black Theology, 2nd ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998 [1973]), pp. xvii-xxviii (Prologue and Introduction), pp. 1-23 (ch. 1).

James H. Cone, God of the Oppressed, revised ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997 [1975]), pp. 1-14 (ch. 1), pp. 150, 169-78 (from ch. 8), pp. 215-225 (from ch. 10).

Anthony B. Pinn, Why Lord? Suffering and Evil in Black Theology (New York: Continuum, 1995), pp. 113-37 (ch. 5).

Course Schedule (topics, readings, assignments)

Course Introduction

Jan. 8-22

5 classes

- why engage in the academic study of religion?
- what is religion?
- why do evil and suffering happen to good people? The story of Job. The problem of theodicy.
- when did evil first enter the world? Two early origin stories.

I. Psychology and Religion

Jan. 27- Feb. 12

6 classes

- religion as evil? a psychoanalytic argument that religion is an illusion and neurotic: Sigmund Freud, Future of an Illusion.
- God as good and evil? a psychological exploration of the moral ambiguity of God in the Job story and the Bible: selections from Carl Jung, Answer to Job.

Instructions for First Essay

Due Tuesday, Feb. 17

Write a dialogue between Freud and Jung. It could be a conversation, an exchange of letters, a scene from a play in which the two are characters, or some other format you create. Introduce yourself as a third partner in the discussion. Pose questions and give your agreement or disagreement (backed up with reasons) to their positions. (You may use here Freud's model of an opponent.)

Have them discuss what they think is important about the relation of religion and evil and how they, as psychologists, approach this topic in different ways.

For example, Freud sees religion as a form of contemporary "evil" which is no longer useful but instead illusory, childish, neurotic, and dangerous.

Jung, on the contrary, claims religion to have great value and truth, but does see the character and development of God as marked by a "shadow," or evil side.

As Freud and Jung argue their positions, and as you respond and counter-argue, paraphrase or use short quotes from their texts to back up the points.

II. Women and Religion (religion and feminism)

Feb. 17- March 4

6 classes

- what is feminism? what does it have to do with religion?
- re-evaluating moral evil or sin from a woman's perspective: theologian Valerie Saiving, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View."
- selections from a contemporary feminist theory of evil: Nel Noddings, Women and Evil.

Instructions for Second Essay

Due Tuesday, March 9

Draw from Noddings, Saiving, the Biblical material, our lectures, discussion, and your own ideas to reflect on issues of women, feminism, religion, and evil. Within this broad area of reflection, develop your own argument or question to explore. Possibilities include:

- What do you learn from feminist approaches to the problem of evil and sin? Or do you find such an approach lacking and misguided?
- Does religion play a role in the association of women with evil? Alternatively, is a more subtle bias at work in which theologians have defined sin (moral evil) solely by the standards of male experience?
- Does gender-neutral or gender-inclusive language about God help avoid problems of sexism? Does it create new problems? Does it alter (for better or worse) how we think about God and female-male relations?
- Are there aspects of religion that seem derogatory or exclusionary toward women? If so, is the problem inherent to scripture and revelation or is it a problem of fallible (but redeemable) institutions and male church leaders/theologians? Is there a need for change? What change is possible?

Include references to both Noddings and Saiving (paraphrase or use short quotes from their texts).

III. Religion and the Arts (literature, song, film)

March 9- 18

4 classes

- Great issues of human nature--such as the problem of evil--are worked out not only in analytical texts, but also in artistic productions. We examine selections from literature, film, and popular music to see how ideas about religion and evil are expressed in art.

literature: Dostoevsky, The Grand Inquisitor, from The Brothers Karamavoz.

film: possible selections include Crimes and Misdemeanors, Pulp Fiction, La Sorciere, The Apostle, Dogma, Grand Canyon.

popular song: selections from rock, reggae, rap, blues, etc.

Instructions for Third Essay Due Tuesday, March 23

Choose a work of art that strikes you as having to do with themes of religion and the problem of evil. It may be a painting, movie, popular song, hymn, poem, novel, short story, architectural monument, symphony, opera, sculpture; in other words, any type of artistic production at all. It may be "high art" or "popular culture" art. My only other criterion is that this art must strike you as powerful, meaningful, intriguing, or beautiful. It should be something that calls forth a response from you and makes you want to think about it.

Begin your essay by describing your chosen work of art. Then analyze how this piece of art represents themes relevant to religion and the problem of evil. Explain your own response: why did you choose this art and what do you make of its portrayal of the themes you are analyzing?

Alternatively, create an original artistic production that deals with themes of religion and evil. Submit both the work of art and a short essay explaining how it explores these themes.

IV. African-American Religious Thought

March 23-April 15

6 classes

- critique and re-evaluation of Western Christian religious and philosophical notions of evil and suffering, based on black experiences of slavery, racism, and oppression: selections from William R. Jones, Is God a White Racist?, James H. Cone, God of the Oppressed., and Anthony B. Pinn, Why Lord?.

Instructions for Fourth Essay Due Tuesday, April 20

Write an essay on "African-American Religious Thought" as one of the interdisciplinary approaches in the academic study of religion. Draw from James Cone, William Jones, Anthony Pinn, lectures and discussion, as well as your own ideas to reflect on issues of race, African-American experience, religion, and evil. Within this broad area of reflection, develop your own argument or question to explore. Possibilities include:

- What do you learn from African-American approaches to the problems of evil, suffering, and sin?
- Reconsider some of the previous approaches we've taken to the study of religion: philosophical, psychological, feminist, or artistic. Are reflections there on problems of evil and suffering sufficient to account for black experiences of slavery, racism, and oppression? Or does African-American religious thought contribute a new perspective and new solutions?
- How do Cone, Jones, and Pinn differ? With whose argument do you most agree or disagree? Explain why.
- Address Jones's question: is God a white racist? Why does Jones pose this question? What does he mean by it? What do you think the exploration of this question contributes to the study of religion and the problem of evil?
- Is God the "God of the oppressed"? What does Cone's phrase mean, for him and in your own understanding? What are the implications or further applications of understanding God in this way?

Engage seriously with the texts of Cone, Jones, and Pinn. Make specific references to at least two of these works, either through paraphrase or short quotes.

Course Conclusions

April 20-29

- film viewing and discussion

Take-home final exam due Friday, May 7, 9 a.m. in the box on my door at Carmichael 101F.

How To Do the Reading

One purpose of this class is to develop further your skills in critical reading or active reading. By this, I mean that you should be self-consciously reflecting on the text as you read. Reading should not be a passive exercise of passing your eyes over a page, but an active and passionate endeavour in which you cultivate your response to the reading.

I call the endeavour "passionate" because learning involves passions. Respond to the readings; get involved with them. Be attentive to how you feel as you read: confused, annoyed, excited, angry, bored, surprised, moved. Note these feelings and all questions or protests or agreements that stir inside you as you read. Ask yourself right away (and continually): why does this text make me feel this way? What do I think about this text and why?

Try to make your reading into a dialogue and debate you hold between yourself and the author. Note down your responses as you go along, either in the margins of the text or on a separate sheet of paper. Use these notes for our class discussions and as a basis for your essays.

To read actively and critically, ask yourself questions and take notes as you go along:

- what is the author's point? summarize key parts of the author's argument.
- with whom or what is the author siding? who or what is the author against?
- do you agree with the author? why or why not?
- what does this make you think of? how does this make you feel?
- what questions or confusions do you have about the text?

BRING YOUR TEXTS TO CLASS. Come ready to **DISCUSS THE READING.**

General Essay Instructions

Remember the course requires four essays (each worth 20% of your final grade) and a final take-home exam (20%). The essays involve no outside research, but ask you to engage the authors' arguments and respond with your own. Follow the specific instructions above for each essay. The essays should be 3-5 pages, typed, double-spaced.

The questions I give out ask you to compare and evaluate authors, so that you integrate an understanding of the texts and class discussions with your own ideas, interpretations, and reflections. Thus, I am looking for essays that demonstrate understanding of the course material, as well as the development of your own ideas. Furthermore, I am looking for essays that are clear, well-organized, and well-written. To that end:

- Indicate clearly in your introduction how you are going to approach the topic and what your focus will be. Make sure your essay is structured with an introduction, development, and conclusion.
- Use specific references and examples from the texts to support your points. Avoid quoting at length from the text; instead, use short quotes or paraphrase your references in your own words. If you do quote, make this clear by using quotation marks. Always give the page number, either in parentheses or in a footnote.
- Be clear and concise. Write in full and correct sentences. And don't forget to

proofread for grammar, spelling, and punctuation. Have a friend or a tutor at the Writing Center help.

If you want to write on a question or topic different from those suggested in the specific instructions below, you are welcome to do so as long as you consult with me first. You may also use various creative formats for your essays, such as an imaginary dialogue, a play scene, a courtroom trial, etc. Feel free to call me (348-8415) or send email (croach@nc.ua.edu), or come see me (101F Carmichael Hall). I will be happy to talk with you about your essay.

Grading Criteria

The following remarks give you criteria for how I grade. Note that four topics recur: presentation of ideas (your own and those of authors studied); use of evidence (how you elaborate and support ideas); design (organization, structure); and basic writing skills (grammar, mechanics, spelling, punctuation). In all cases, clarity, coherence, and conciseness are also important.

The A paper or answer is always mechanically correct and free of errors, save perhaps for one or two proofreading errors that a reader is willing to overlook because of the otherwise high quality. The reader knows exactly what the author wants to say. The ideas are clearly presented, interesting, insightful, and even original. The ideas are well supported by specific, apt examples and well-chosen quotes. The paper or answer is coherent and well-organized with a tight structure. There is no repetition or wasted words. It has style, perhaps a sense of humour. Reading it, one feels a mind at work. The reader is convinced that the writer cares about her or his ideas and about the language which conveys the ideas.

The B paper or answer has few errors in spelling, punctuation, and grammar. Some of the sentences may be awkward, but they are on the whole clear, and in them thought follows naturally on thought. The paragraphs may be unwieldy now and then, but they are organized around one main idea. The ideas are fairly clear, well-developed, and supported with evidence. The paper on the whole makes sense throughout. It does not contain unexplained digressions.

The C paper or answer may have ideas to present, but they are still quite vague and broad, or else uninteresting or obvious. It does not advance an argument that anyone might care to debate. The ideas are often not supported by specific evidence (examples, quotes, paraphrases). Even if it has clear and interesting ideas, a paper without sufficient supporting evidence may be a C paper. The C paper often has mechanical faults, errors in grammar and spelling, but note that a paper without such flaws may still be a C paper.

The D or F paper or answer is often filled with mechanical faults, errors in grammar, and errors in spelling. The paragraphs do not hold together; ideas do not develop from sentence to sentence. It usually repeats the same thoughts again and again, perhaps in slightly different language but often in the same words. It has very vague, broad, or uninteresting ideas which are not developed or supported with evidence. There is little indication that the writer understands the material being presented. It may not be on topic and may be irrelevant to the assignment or question.