Genres of Western Religious Writing

A quick scan of the headlines of Religion News, the central religious news service on the web, revealed dispatches about the shortage of imams in the US, humanists’ efforts to promote a Bible cleansed of miracles, religiously motivated violence in the Middle East, kosher food pantries, and gay marriage. Though this snapshot of headlines might look like a big religious smorgasbord, it is also indicative of the situation of religion in “the West” today. Religion in “the West” resembles more and more a confusing patchwork of ideas, cultures, and identities. “The West” is no longer dominated by one distinct tradition (i.e., mainline Protestantism, or Roman Catholicism), nor by one exclusive organizational form (i.e., the Church). As a result, in and outside the academy, a comparative approach to religious ideas and their social manifestations has taken hold.

Genres of Western Religious Writing has been developed with this comparative approach as its methodological guide. It offers an introduction to some of the main genres of Western religious writing (i.e., scripture, prayer, pilgrimage, myth, and ritual) as well as legacies and challenges of Western religious traditions (i.e. pluralism, authority, social ethics, and violence). This class is based on the premise that closer study of certain genres across cultures and traditions can offer a fresh look onto “the West’s” religious economy and imagination.
During the course of the semester we will read religious (or spiritual) memoirs by Danya Ruttenberg, Barbara Brown Taylor, and Haroon Moghul. Memoirs are a central genre of Western religious writing since Augustin of Hippo’s (358-430) famous *Confessions*, in which he tells his readers about his own (reprehensible) youth and his conversion to Christianity. The memoirs will serve as a playing field to test ideas about socio-religious formations, religious virtuosi, religious pluralism, - activism, and - criticism. We will also examine the concept of ritual and will take a closer look at the ritual processes around dying and mourning in Judaism. Throughout the semester, we will draw on a good amount of theory in order to make better sense of the massive transformations in the contemporary American religious landscape.

As a *Communication B* course, this class is designed as a reading- and writing-intensive course, which follows the standard UW-Madison rules and requirements for such classes. The class also allows for regular oral participation and presentation. It meets for two 75-minute class periods each week over the semester and “carries the expectation that students will work on course learning activities (reading, writing, problem sets, studying, etc.) for about 3 hours out of classroom for every class period.”

Each student is required to give a 8-10 minutes in-class power point presentation on a selected religious topic or thinker. Some bibliographical information will be provided, but students should plan to use the library resources to prepare for their presentation. Each presentation needs to be emailed to the instructor no later than 1:00 PM the day following the presentation. Presentations end with three questions for classroom discussion.

There are two writing fellows from the UW-Madison Writing Center assigned to this class. A writing fellow will meet with you twice for about 30 minutes and respond to a draft of two of your essays. The fellow will help you to revise and improve your essays. You are required to submit your draft and your final version of these two essays as well as the written comments by the writing fellow. You will be graded on the final versions of these essays.

The learning goals of this course align with the learning outcome goals of the Religious Studies Program, especially goals 1 (“close reading, interpretation, and written and oral analysis”) and 3 (“categorizing, analyzing, and comparing diverse systems of value and belief in a variety of contexts”).

Grading will be determined as follows:

Discussion/participation/attendance = 20%
One 8-10 minutes oral presentation in class = 15%
One short paper (2-3 pages; about 720-1080 words) = 10%
One medium paper (3-4 pages; about 1080-1500 words) = 15%
Two larger papers (6-7 pages; [*Pre-Med students may write their final paper as a 8-10 pages one as required for application to Med School*] about 2,200-2,600 [2,900-3,700] words; each = 20%) = 40%
Total = 100%
The grade scale is: A=100-94%; AB=93-88%; B=87-83%; BC=82-77%; C=76-70%; D=69-60%.

**Books That Need to be Purchased**


**The Following Readings Will Be Uploaded to Canvas**


Abu-Lughod, Lila, Selections from *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (2013).


Ghaneabassiri, Kambiz, *A History of Islam in America: From the New World to the New World Order* (2010), 327-381


Van Gennep, Arnold, Selections from The Rites of Passage (org. 1909; 1960).


Class Schedule and Readings

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<th>Date</th>
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<tr>
<td>January 22</td>
<td>Introduction to Class</td>
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| January 29 | What is Religion?  
| January 31 | The Numinous  
| February 5 | Judaism, Christianity, and Islam: The Essentials  
Read: Prothero, God Is Not One, 25-99 and 243-278.  
- Three in-class presentations on Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Each student needs to bring one religious object of the religious tradition s/he is presenting on. |
| February 7 | God as Center of the Western Religions  
Read: Hick, God Has Many Names, 40-78; Livingston, Anatomy of the Sacred, 171-179; Cornell, “The Ethiopians Dilemma,” 85-129. |
| February 12| Sacred Scripture in the Western Religious Traditions  
- Four in-class presentations on the Torah, the Talmud, the New Testament, and the Qur'an. |
February 14  
**The Protestant Reformation and the Problem of Authority**
- Three in-class presentations on Martin Luther (1483-1546), John Calvin (1509-1564), and Isaac Mayer Wise (1819-1900)

➤ First paper (3-4 pages; 1080-1500 words): Should the comparative study of religion emphasize difference or unity? Discuss Stephen Prothero’s arguments as developed in *God Is Not One* (2010) against the backdrop of John Hick’s approach to religion in *God Has Many Names*. (What are the strengths and what are the weaknesses of their different positions?)

➤ The paper is due at the beginning of class.

February 19  
**Religious Pluralism**

February 21  
**Dialogue Between Religions**
(Watch: Jim Wallis, *An Evangelical Christian Looks at Jews and Muslims*).

February 26  
**Myth**

February 28  
**Ritual**
Read: Van Gennep, Selections from *The Rites of Passage*; Turner, “Between and Betwixt,” 93-111; Grimes, “Ritual,” 259-270.
- Two in-class presentations on the Jewish Sabbath and on Christian (Holy) Communion.

March 5  
**Jewish Funeral Rites**

March 7  
**Prayer and Silence**
- One in-class presentation on prayer in Islam.

March 12  
**Holy Men and Women**
- Three in-class presentations on Francis of Assisi (1182-1226), Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179), and Thomas Merton (1915-1968).

➤ First draft of second paper (6-7 pages): How does Samuel Heilman make use of the concepts of myth and ritual in his book: *When a Jew Dies*?
For your paper, you need to analyze and apply at least two different theorists we read in/for class. Stay away from anecdotes about your own religious beliefs and from statements of devotion and faith. Write academically! Make sure your paper has a clear argument, title, introduction, and conclusion. Your citations and bibliography need to be in Chicago Style. Please use endnotes when you format your paper.

https://researchguides.library.wisc.edu/c.php?g=177820&p=1170615
https://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide/citation-guide-1.html

The paper is due at the beginning of class.

Make an appointment with a writing fellow.

March 14
Communities and Cults

SPRING BREAK (March 19 and 21)

March 26
No Class

March 28
No Class

April 2
Memoir (I)
Read: Ruttenberg, Surprised by God; Lischer, “Writing the Christian Life,” 22-27.

Revised paper with comments by writing fellow due at beginning of class.

April 4
Pilgrimage
• Two in-class presentations on the Hajj and on Aliyah.

April 6 and 7
Mandatory participation in one of the 90 min sessions of the CRGC interfaith conference on campus. Opportunity for extra credit.

April 9
Dwelling and Seeking
Read: Wuthnow, After Heaven, 1-84, 142-198.

April 11
Pilgrimage

April 16
Memoir (II)
Read: Brown Taylor, Leaving Church.

Third paper (2-3 pages): How would you explain the attraction of the concept of pilgrimage in the 21st century?

The paper is due at the beginning of class.
April 18  

**From the Social Prophets to Social Activism**
Read: Bhattacharyya, “Social Activism and Engagement,” 115-134.
- Three in-class presentations on Dorothy Day (1897-1980), Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968), and Malcolm X (1925-1965).

April 23  

**Islam in America**
Read: Ghaneabassiri, *History of Islam in America*, 327-381; Abu-Lughod, Selections from *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*; Abdul Khabeer, Selections from *Muslim Cool*.

April 25  

**Memoir (III)**
Read: Moghul, *How to be a Muslim*.

April 30  

**Religion and Violence**

- First draft of final paper (6-7 pages): Analyze, compare, and contrast two of the three memoirs we discussed over the course of the semester.
- You need to employ Peter L. Berger’s and Robert Wuthnow’s ideas and terminology in your paper.
- Make sure your paper has a clear argument, title, introduction, and conclusion. Your citations and bibliography need to be in Chicago Style. Please use endnotes when you format your paper.
- Make an appointment with a writing fellow.

May 2  

**Conclusion**

- Revised final paper with comments by writing fellow due by Friday, May 10, 6:00 PM in my mailbox - # 5010 in the Mosse Humanities building.