The Nature of Religion (REL 110)
M/Th, 1:00-2:15

Prof. Cohen
joshua.cohen@hunter.cuny.edu

Course Description

This course will introduce you to the academic study of religion—above all, by historicizing and exploring the ways in which a range of modern Western thinkers have attempted to define something called "religion." Moving across and connecting anthropology, sociology, psychology, psychoanalysis, philosophy, history, and theology, among other disciplines, we will pay special attention to the *construction* of religion as a seemingly natural category: as we will see, there is no one, once-and-for-all-fixed nature of religion; the nature of religion changes depending on who is doing the defining. In almost every case, the thing we so confidently call "religion" will be the product of a modern, Western, Christian imagination. We will thus end our reading veering from our survey of the traditional study of religion, turning to a work by the Native writer and theologian Vine Deloria Jr.: What if, Deloria asks, our dominant view of religion is linked to our society's catastrophic destruction of the natural world? (He was writing in 1972.)

Course Objectives:

1. Learn to think critically about the historical construction of seemingly natural categories, among them, the modern Western category of "religion";
2. Cultivate a familiarity with the history, theories, and methods of the modern study of religion, with particular attention to the irreducible *interdisciplinarity* of the field;
3. Cultivate the scholarly skills of historicization, citation, and regular writing;
4. Cultivate an instinct for the porosity of the border between the study of religion and religious thought itself—and for the ways in which academic study might enable us to alter our everyday world.

Course Assignments

Weekly Reading Responses

Every week you will post a reading response to Brightspace. This response need only be one-two paragraphs long, and should reflect on some aspect of that week's readings. (You do not need a thesis, or certainty about what you've read: your reflection can be a series of questions, or an attempt to express confusion, or even a rant.) ***These responses will be due every Wednesday at noon***. (This means you will likely only be responding to Monday's readings, unless you find yourself ahead.)

In addition to posting your weekly response, you will post a response to one of your peers' weekly responses. ***These responses-to-responses should be posted by Thursday at noon.***

Midterm Exam

You'll have a midterm exam. The exam will entail several short essay questions. It will happen in class. If you do the weekly readings and assignments and come to class, this will be *a breeze*.

Final Exam

You'll have a final exam. The exam will entail several short essay questions. It will happen in class. If you do the weekly readings and assignments and come to class, this will be *a breeze*.

Grading Breakdown

Participation (Attendance + Class Conversations): 25%
Weekly Reading Responses: 25%
Midterm: 20%
Final Exam: 30%

Course Policies

Attendance

Please come to class. If life stuff causes you to miss a class, please email me a brief note.

I can gift you one unexcused absence (i.e. an absence unaccompanied by an email to me). After that, every unexcused absence will mean ½ letter grade off your Participation grade.

If you miss 10+ classes, I won't be able to give you a passing grade.

Weekly Reading Responses

If you use Generative AI (ChatGPT, etc.), I can't really give you credit.

Devices

It really will be ideal for you to print the day's readings, and bring that to class with you. Our classes will be conversations, and screens make conversation tricky. But if printing is not possible for you, or if you have a specific need for the accessibility provided by a screen, of course, you can use the technology.

College Policies

Hunter College Policy on Academic Integrity

> "Academic dishonesty includes, but is not limited to, cheating, plagiarism, obtaining an unfair advantage, and falsifying records or documents whether intentional or not.
>
> Hunter College upholds the right to promote academic integrity on its campus as an educational institution of the City University of New York. The College has the responsibility to review all charges of academic dishonesty and implement sanctions, including, but not limited to, failing the course, official transcript notation, suspension or expulsion from the College when it has been determined that academic dishonesty did occur.
>
> All questions regarding the procedures or the College's disciplinary process should be referred to the Office of Student Conduct in the Vice President for Student Affairs and Dean of Students office."

Hunter College Policy on Sexual Misconduct

> "In compliance with the CUNY Policy on Sexual Misconduct, Hunter College reaffirms the prohibition of any sexual misconduct, which includes sexual violence, sexual harassment, and gender-based harassment retaliation against students, employees, or visitors, as well as certain intimate relationships. Students who have experienced any form of sexual violence on or off campus (including CUNY-sponsored trips and events) are entitled to the rights outlined in the Bill of rights for Hunter College."

ADA Policy

> "In compliance with the American Disability Act of 1990 (ADA) and with Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Hunter College is committed to ensuring educational parity and accommodations for all students with documented disabilities and/or medical conditions. It is recommended that all students with documented disabilities (Emotional, Medical, Physical, and/or Learning) consult the Office of AccessABILITY, located in Room E1214B, to secure necessary academic accommodations. For further information and assistance, please call: (212) 772- 4857 or (212) 650-3230."

Readings

All course readings will be available either a) through Hunter OneSearch (via the libraries website) or b) uploaded on Brightspace. In the Reading Schedule below, *H* indicates the former, *B* the latter.

McCutcheon's *Studying Religion* will also be available on reserve in the Leon & Toby Cooperman Library, and for purchase at the bookstore. (I'd also personally maybe look for affordable copies online.)

Reading Schedule

Week 1

January 27: **First class.**

January 30: McCutcheon, Introduction, *Studying Religion: An Introduction* (B)

Week 2

February 3: McCutcheon, Chapter 1, *Studying Religion* (B)

February 6: Mary Douglas, Chapter 2 ("Secular Defilement"), *Purity and Danger* (H)

Week 3

February 10: McCutcheon, Chapter 2, *Studying Religion* (B)

February 13: J.Z. Smith, "Religion, Religions, Religious" (B)

Week 4

February 17: **No class.**

February 20: McCutcheon, Chapter 3, *Studying Religion* (B)

Week 5

February 24: Rudolf Otto, "'Mysterium Tremendum,'" *The Idea of the Holy* (H)

February 27: William James, "Lecture II: Circumscription of the Topic," *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (H)

Week 6

March 3: McCutcheon, Chapter 4, *Studying Religion* (B)

March 6: Sigmund Freud, "Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices" (B)

Week 7

March 10: McCutcheon, Chapter 5, *Studying Religion*

March 13: Bruce Lincoln, "Chapter One: The Study of Religion in the Current Political Moment," *Holy Terrors: Thinking About Religion After September 11* (B)

Week 8

March 17: McCutcheon, Chapter 6, *Studying Religion* (B) OR Karl Marx, Introduction, *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right (*B) (i.e., TBD)

March 20**: In-Class Midterm Exam.**

Week 9

March 24: McCutcheon, Chapter 7, *Studying Religion* (B)

March 27: Wendy Doniger, "Other Scholars' Myths: The Hunter and the Sage," in *Other People's Myths: The Cave of Echoes* (B)

Week 10

March 31: **No class.**

April 3: McCutcheon, Chapter 8, *Studying Religion* (B)

Week 11

April 7: J.Z. Smith, Introduction, *Imagining Religion* (B)

April 10: Tomoko Masuzawa, Introduction, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism*

Week 12

April 14: **No class.**

April 17: **No class.**

Week 13

April 21: Vine Deloria, Jr., Introduction and Chapter 1 ("The Indian Movement"), *God Is Red: A Native View of Religion* (H)

April 24: Deloria, Chapter 2 ("The Indians of the American Imagination"), *God Is Red* (H)

Week 14

April 28: Deloria, Chapter 3 ("The Religious Challenge"), *God Is Red* (H)

May 1: Deloria, Chapter 13 ("Christianity and Contemporary American Culture"), *God Is Red* (H)

Week 15

May 5: Deloria, Chapter 17 ("Religion Today"), *God Is Red* (H)

May 8: J.Z. Smith, "Religion, Religions, Religious" (Reread!)

Week 16

May 12: ***In-Class Final Exam.***

May 15: **Last class.**