Nature of Religion

REL 11000.05

Instructor: Thomas M. Pflanz (*they/them/he*), tpflanz@thombelle.com (until CUNY address is active)
Meeting Time: Tuesdays and Fridays, 2:30–3:45 PM
Office Hours: Tuesday 3:45–4:45 PM, or by appointment; Zoom
Location: Online (Synchronous)

Course Description:
In order to approach the study of religion, we must admit that many see 'religion' in the broadest sense as that which determines what reality is primary (i.e., what is 'God') and therefore establishes the context through which everything else is evaluated and analyzed. Is a man best described as an individual? A woman? a parent? a citizen? a Westerner? an earthling? a part of the universe? a child of God? Does it depend on what is deemed the essential reality, the basic context of understanding? is it family? Society? mysticism? culture? the earth? the universe? existence itself or God? Each analysis presumes an assertion of one context as more valid than the others; each thus involves a faith of sorts. And to make matters even more complicated these faiths are often unconscious on our parts.

Within the general context, however, we usually arrive at the study of religion through what our society has pre-determined religion to be. But what makes religions religious? Is it possible to ask this question without understanding what cultural implications surround not only the study of religion, but religion itself? Is religion a set of beliefs and practices acted out in ritual and myth, or does it imply direct contact with the divine? Do similarities exist between world religions? If so, how do we study them? The relationships established between the holy and the worshipper, if such a relationship indeed exists within an established religion, also forces us to build upon the above descriptions and questions of faith and experiment with how they have interacted within our society in the past, as well as today.

This introductory course asks these questions, among many others, and examines elements that unite various religious traditions, from tribal religions to contemporary Western religions. We will begin by approaching the various definitions of religion, and then consider topics such as ritual, art, the hero, morality, legalism, mysticism and magic. This will take us through the primary texts of each culture studied in order to best understand the issues of obligation and relationship between the object and subject in religion. We will also consider various interpretations of belief and practice. Finally, we will ask what the fates of traditional religion in the modern world in light of issues and controversies are today.

Course Goals and Objectives:

Students will learn to:

1. Gather, interpret, and assess information from a variety of sources and points of view with seminal works in the academic study of religion.
2. Evaluate evidence and arguments critically and analytically through formal papers, informal in-class writings, readings, and class discussion.
3. Produce well-reasoned written or oral arguments using evidence to support conclusions by responding to writing assignments in which students draw conclusions about issues in the study of religion.

In addition, students will learn to:

a. Identify and apply the fundamental concepts and methods of Religious Studies. exploring the relationship between the individual and society. Through this interdisciplinary field, students engage the processes and products of anthropology, archaeology, sociology, psychology, cultural studies, history, and philosophy, as they relate to the phenomenological identification and analysis of religious texts, practices, behaviors, and communities.
b. Examine how an individual's place in society affects experiences, values, or choices by using various examples of religious examples in writing and in film.
c. Identify and engage with local, national, or global trends or ideologies, and analyze their impact on individual or collective decision-making.

Course Materials:

This course will pull from a variety of primary and secondary sources on relevant topics. PDF copies of every text used in class will be posted on Brightspace. You may want to have access to the complete texts in addition to the excerpts for further reading, research, and reference. In the case that I have access to a PDF of a full text, that will be posted in addition to the excerpt assigned for class.

Grading, Assignments, and Assessments:

Attendance and Participation	10%
Weekly Writings (total)	20%
Writing Assignments (total)	50%
Final Project	20%

Attendance (5%)

Attendance is required for this class. You will be allowed two absences, no questions asked; please email me with as much advance warning as possible. Additionally, any absences due to hospitalization, a positive Covid test, or other extreme illness will be excused (no need to send a Doctor's Note). After that, absences will be decided on a case-by-case basis. This classroom is intended to be a place of trust, so I will not ask you for proof of your reason.

Participation (5%)

This class and your learning will be highly reliant on the discussions we have during class meetings. Therefore, participation is essential. Participation can be counted in a few ways during class meetings, namely spoken participation and the usage of the chat for additional thoughts and questions. If you do not want to participate in those ways, or cannot for any reason, you may use the Virtual Participation assignment for that class meeting. Every Virtual Participation submission must include at least one question and one thought or response to something from either the reading for the day or the class meeting. These questions and responses may be used in a subsequent

class meeting. This must be submitted by the end of the day on which the class meeting was held.

In the case that you are absent, you may still gain half credit for participation by submitting something to that day's Virtual Participation assignment. For classes where the content is hosted asynchronously, participation will be graded through submissions to that day's Virtual Participation Assignment.

Weekly Writings:

There will be two types of written responses required every week in class (with the exception of Weeks 1, 14, and 16). They are:

- Classroom Glossary (10%): Choose a word that was used in one of the course readings or during a class meeting that you didn't initially know the meaning of, that you were unfamiliar with, or that you want a deeper understanding of. Look up the definition of the word in the Merriam-Webster online dictionary (https://www.merriam-webster.com/) and copy-paste the definition, a link to the webpage of the definition, and the citation (author and page number) of where you found the word to Brightspace by 10:00 PM every Friday night. If you cannot find a definition on Merrian-Webster, you may look on Wikipedia for a definition. I will be pulling all of the definitions together into a shared Google doc (which will be updated regularly) that will be accessible on Brightspace for everyone to view. Please double check the document before submitting your word. Any words that were included in the Google doc before the day of submission will not be accepted and that entry will count as incomplete.
- Reading Response (10%): Write a 75-150 word response to one of the class readings (graded out of 10 points), responding to at least one of the following questions (respond to primary sources with Primary Source questions and to secondary sources with Secondary Source questions). This response is due by 10:00 PM every Friday night. You must respond to every prompt (except the last one) at least once during the semester:

- Primary Source: What is the theological, historical, or rhetorical purpose of the excerpt we read?
- Primary Source: What are some similarities and differences between this text and another primary source you have read before (either in class or elsewhere)?
- Secondary Source: In your own words, how is the author understanding "religion" (explicitly or implicitly) in the excerpt we read?
- Secondary Source: What is the rhetorical purpose of the excerpt we read? What is the author trying to convince us of, and how?
- Primary OR Secondary Source: What is a question the text raised for you, and how would you approach looking deeper into the subject?
- Primary AND Secondary Source: Give a short description of a primary text from a previous week's class using an interpretive lens from a secondary source from this week. If you meaningfully and successfully respond to this prompt, you will receive one extra point for this weekly writing assignment.

The lowest grade for your Glossary entry and the lowest grade for your Reading Response will be dropped at the end of the semester.

Writing Assignments:

Every assignment is due at 11:00 PM on a Friday. All writing assignments must be typed and submitted as a Word doc with revision history active. The format must be 12-point font, Times New Roman, and double spaced. A full description of each assignment will be posted separately on Brightspace at least three weeks prior to the assignment's due date.

- Site Visit Response Paper, due September 26th (10%): You must attend/observe a religious service, ceremony, or similar event. This may include a visit to a Sunni or Sufi Mosque, a Hindu temple, a Christian service (various denominations), a Japanese tea ceremony, a Zen Buddhist meditation service, a visit to a Jewish synagogue, etc. The choice is yours, and I will supply a few suggested places, as we get the semester underway. Observation and respect,

not participation, is a requirement. After the visit, you must write a short reaction paper detailing what you observed. This paper must be 3–5 pages (750–1250 words) in length.

- Assignment #2, due October 17th (10%): Details TBA
- Object Analysis, due November 14th (10%): Details TBA
- Assignment #4, due December 5th (10%): Details TBA
- Defining Religion, due August 26th; August 28th; December 12th (10%): There will be three components to this assignment. At the end of the first class meeting, students will be given time to complete a short definition of religion which will be submitted at the end of class. At the end of the second class meeting, students will be given time to complete a revised definition of religion which will be submitted at the end of class. The third component will be completed outside of class time. It will require the student to reflect on their initial definitions of religion and discuss what works and what doesn't for the definitions. This paper must be 3–5 pages (750–1250 words).

I will allow revisions for every Writing Assignment. You will have one week from the time you receive your graded assignment with my comments to upload a revised version of the assignment.

Final Project (20%):

Details TBA. Project proposal due Friday, November 21st. Final Project due Friday, December 19th. This will not be eligible for revisions.

Extensions and Late Assignments:

I am more than happy to grant extensions, given enough advance warning — minimum 12 hours before the posted submission deadline. Late assignments will be penalized by 2% of the total grade for every day that it is late; I would rather you submit a complete assignment a day or two late than an unfinished one on time. If an assignment is submitted late and then revised, you will only have a total of 2% of the total grade deducted, unless the revised draft is also submitted late.

However, all work MUST be submitted by the last day of the course. If you feel that you cannot complete the work, please express this in writing so that we can discuss your options. Failure to submit coursework does not guarantee an "incomplete" in the course, and may result in a failing grade.

Course Policies:

Classroom Expectations

- Contacting the Instructor: If you need to contact me, please email me at tpflanz@thombelle.com (until CUNY address is active). I will do my best to respond within 24–48 hours.
- Syllabus Change Policy: This syllabus is a living document and will be updated. Students will be notified when a change is made.
- Camera Policy: If asked by the instuctor, students must have their cameras turned on during class meetings.

Campus Policy in Compliance with the American Disabilities Act

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 Accessibility, located in Room E1214B, to secure necessary academic accommodations. For further information and assistance, please call: (212) 772-4857 or (212) 650-3230.

Disability and Accommodations Supplement

In addition to the information outlined in the "Campus Policy in Compliance with the American Disabilities Act" section, if you have accommodations that you do not have documentation for but feel would assist in your success in our classroom, please do not hesitate to contact me so we can discuss ways to make this an accessible classroom for you. My goal is to provide you with a learning environment that is most conducive to your education.

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.

a. Sexual Violence: Students are strongly encouraged to immediately report the incident by calling 911, contacting NYPD Special Victims Division Hotline (646-610-7272) or their local police precinct, or contacting the College's Public Safety Office (212-772-4444).
b. All Other Forms of Sexual Misconduct: Students are also encouraged to contact the College's Title IX Campus Coordinator, Dean John Rose (jtrose@hunter.cuny.edu or 212-650-3262) or Colleen Barry (colleen.barry@hunter.cuny.edu or 212-772-4534) and seek complimentary services through the Counseling and Wellness Services Office, Hunter East 1123.

CUNY Policy on Sexual Misconduct:
http://www.cuny.edu/about/administration/offices/la/Policy-on-Sexual-Misconduct-12-1-14-with-links.pdf

Classroom Recordings

In the event that recordings must be made of class content during class meetings, I will include the following: Please be advised that students who participate in this class with their camera on or use a profile image are agreeing to have their video or image recorded solely for the purpose of creating a record for students enrolled in the class to refer to, including those enrolled students who are unable to attend live. If you are unwilling to consent to have your profile or video image recorded, be sure to keep your camera off and do not use a profile image. Likewise, students who un-mute during class and participate orally are agreeing to have their voices recorded. If you are not willing to consent to have your voice recorded during class, you will need to

keep your mute button activated and communicate exclusively using the "chat" feature, which allows students to type questions and comments live.

Diversity, Inclusion, and Classroom Climate

It is my hope that we are able to foster a kind, respectful, and curious classroom environment. I will not tolerate any bigotry, including but not limited to racism, sexism, transphobia, homophobia, islamophobia, and antisemitism. Worth a special note is the role of colonialism in the field of religious studies, which has led to the othering of non-European and non-Christian points of view. We will discuss this aspect more in class, but overall our goal is a careful and respectful analysis of both familiar and unfamiliar religious and cultural practices.

I will be doing all that I can to make the classroom a safe and welcoming space. Please do not hesitate to reach out to me if you have any thoughts or suggestions to help improve or sustain the inclusivity and safety of the classroom, up to and including my own actions, behaviors, and words.

Academic Integrity

Hunter College regards acts of academic dishonesty (e.g., plagiarism, cheating on examinations, obtaining unfair advantage and falsification of records and official documents) as serious offenses against the values of intellectual honesty. The College is committed to enforcing the CUNY policy on Academic Integrity and will pursue cases of academic dishonesty according to the Hunter College Academic Integrity Procedures.

Plagiarism is presenting as your own:

- a phrase, sentence, or passage from another writer’s work without using quotation marks;
- a paraphrased passage from another writer’s work without citing it;
- facts, ideas, or written text gathered or downloaded and not attributed;
- another student’s work with your name on it;
- a purchased paper or “research” from a term paper mill.

Other forms of academic fraud include:

- “collaborating” between two or more students who then submit the same paper under their individual names.
- submitting the same paper for two or more courses without the knowledge and the expressed permission of all teachers involved.
- giving permission to another student to use your work for a class.
- Using AI to write or re-write assignments based on other people’s work

When plagiarism is confirmed, whether accidental or deliberate, students must be reported to the Dean of Students and will FAIL THE ASSIGNMENT, as per departmental policy.

You are always welcome to meet with me to discuss your paper beforehand, and may hand in drafts at any time for detailed feedback.

About AI:

The use of generative AI tools (e.g., Chat GPT and others) is prohibited in this course for completing course assignments, unless otherwise directed by the instructor. We cannot, however, ignore that AI exists, so please approach it responsibly and ethically.

1. Write your paper first, as writing builds critical thinking. If you use a tool to help polish your work, do this after you have written your paper
2. Any work that was cut and pasted, or modified, from an AI query will receive a failing grade.
3. AI tools are only permitted for brainstorming, checking grammar and style, drafting an outline, or fine tuning research questions.
4. REAL citations are a must-have for our work. Note that AI often hallucinates journals and books. You are responsible for your content. Not citing your sources will also lead to a failing grade for the assignment.
5. Be wary of biases in AI: the perspective is very Western, very white, and very Protestant Christian. This is not our perspective in academic religious studies and, most definitely, not our bias in the Program in Religion.

6. If you use AI to generate images, also be aware of these biases, and that it often creates false information (for example, mislabeling artifacts from cultures). You must note that you are using AI to generate such images, and what AI you used.

AI is a tool, but some tools work well, and other tools do not work well – depending on their use. Keep this in mind as you approach your assignments.

Your continuation in this course shows your agreement to policies outlined in this syllabus.

Overview of Course Schedule:

Week	Date	Topic	Notes and Assignments
01	08/26 (T)	Course Overview	Due: Defining Religion v1
	08/29 (F)	What is Religion?	Martin 2017 Due: Defining Religion v2
02	09/02 (T)	What is Religion?	Smith 1991; Tillich 1959
	09/05 (F)		Due: Glossary; Reading Response
03	09/09 (T)		
	09/12 (F)		Due: Glossary; Reading Response
04	09/16 (T)		
	09/19 (F)		Due: Glossary; Reading Response
05	09/23 (T)	NO CLASS	
	09/26 (F)		Due: Glossary; Reading Response; Site Visit Response Paper
06	09/30 (T)		
	10/03 (F)		Due: Glossary; Reading Response
07	10/07 (T)		
	10/10 (F)		Due: Glossary; Reading Response
08	10/14 (T)	NO CLASS	
	10/17 (F)		Due: Glossary; Reading Response; ASSIGNMENT #2
09	10/21 (T)		
	10/24 (F)	NO CLASS	Due: Glossary; Reading Response
10	10/28 (T)		
	10/31 (F)		Due: Glossary; Reading Response
11	11/04 (T)		
	11/07 (F)		Due: Glossary; Reading Response

12	11/11 (T)		ASYNCHRONOUS
	11/14 (F)		Due: Glossary; Reading Response; Object Analysis
13	11/18 (T)		
	11/21 (F)		ASYNCHRONOUS Due: Glossary; Reading Response; Final Project Proposal
14	11/25 (T)		ASYNCHRONOUS
	11/28 (F)	NO CLASS	
15	12/02 (T)		
	12/05 (F)		Due: Glossary; Reading Response; ASSIGNMENT #4
16	12/09 (T)		
	12/12 (F)		Due: Glossary; Reading Response; Defining Religion Response Paper
Finals	12/19		Due: Final Project

Course Schedule:

Week 01:

Tuesday, August 26th:

Readings: N/A

Assignments: **Defining Religion v1 DUE** @ End of Class

Friday, August 29th:

Readings: Martin (2017), pp. 1–18 (Chapter 1)

Assignments: **Defining Religion v2 DUE** @ End of Class

Week 02:

Tuesday, September 2nd:

Readings: Smith (1991), pp. 7–18 (Chapter 1)

Tillich (1959), pp. 3–9

Friday, September 5th:

Readings:

Assignments: **Classroom Glossary Submission DUE** @ 9:00 PM

Reading Response Submission DUE @ 10:00 PM

Week 03:

Tuesday, September 9th:

Readings:

Friday, September 12th:

Readings:

Assignments: **Classroom Glossary Submission DUE** @ 9:00 PM

Reading Response Submission DUE @ 10:00 PM

Weel 04:

Tuesday, September 16th:

Readings:

Friday, September 19th:

Readings:

Assignments: **Classroom Glossary Submission DUE** @ 9:00 PM

Reading Response Submission DUE @ 10:00 PM

Week 05:

Tuesday, September 23rd: **NO CLASS**

Friday, September 26th:

Readings:

Assignments: **Classroom Glossary Submission DUE** @ 9:00 PM

Reading Response Submission DUE @ 10:00 PM

Site Visit Response Paper DUE @ 11:00 PM

Week 06:

Tuesday, September 30th:

Readings:

Friday, October 3rd:

Readings:

Assignments: **Classroom Glossary Submission DUE** @ 9:00 PM

Reading Response Submission DUE @ 10:00 PM

Week 07:

Tuesday, October 7th:

Readings:

Friday, October 10th:

Readings:

Assignments: **Classroom Glossary Submission DUE** @ 9:00 PM

Reading Response Submission DUE @ 10:00 PM

Week 08:

Tuesday, October 14th: **NO CLASS**

Friday, October 17th:

Readings:

Assignments: **Classroom Glossary Submission DUE** @ 9:00 PM

Reading Response Submission DUE @ 10:00 PM

ASSIGNMENT #2 DUE @ 11:00 PM

Week 09:

Tuesday, October 21st:

Readings:

Friday, October 24th: **NO CLASS**

Assignments: **Classroom Glossary Submission DUE** @ 9:00 PM

Reading Response Submission DUE @ 10:00 PM

Week 10:

Tuesday, October 28th:

Readings:

Friday, October 31st:

Readings:

Assignments: **Classroom Glossary Submission DUE** @ 9:00 PM

Reading Response Submission DUE @ 10:00 PM

Week 11:

Tuesday, November 4th:

Readings:

Friday, November 7th:

Readings:

Assignments: **Classroom Glossary Submission DUE** @ 9:00 PM

Reading Response Submission DUE @ 10:00 PM

Week 12:

Tuesday, November 11th: **CLASS HELD ASYNCHRONOUSLY**

Readings:

Friday, November 14th:

Readings:

Assignments: **Classroom Glossary Submission DUE** @ 9:00 PM

Reading Response Submission DUE @ 10:00 PM

Object Analysis DUE @ 11:00 PM

Week 13:

Tuesday, November 18th:

Readings:

Friday, November 21st: **CLASS HELD ASYNCHRONOUSLY**

Readings:

Assignments: **Classroom Glossary Submission DUE** @ 9:00 PM

Reading Response Submission DUE @ 10:00 PM

Final Project Proposal DUE @ 11:00 PM

Week 14:

Tuesday, November 25th: **CLASS HELD ASYNCHRONOUSLY**

Readings:

Friday, November 28th: **NO CLASS**

Week 15:

Tuesday, December 2nd:

Readings:

Friday, December 5th:

Readings:

Assignments: **Classroom Glossary Submission DUE** @ 9:00 PM

Reading Response Submission DUE @ 10:00 PM

ASSIGNMENT #4 DUE @ 11:00 PM

Week 16:

Tuesday, December 9th:

Readings:

Friday, December 12th:

Readings:

Assignments: **Defining Religion Response DUE** @ 11:00 PM

Finals Period (December 16th–22nd):

Friday, December 19th:

FINAL PROJECT DUE @ 10:59 PM