

# Religion and Media

## RELST 304

Instructor: Prof. Brent Rodríguez Plate

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Office hours: 10.00-11.30am Mon/Wed, or by appt. Room 206 Benedict Hall

### Course Objectives and Goals:

What is the difference between an oral myth told around a fire amongst a community, a printed myth read in the silence of one's own house, and an audio-video myth disseminated through the Internet? How are rituals affected and altered by differing media of communication? What is the relation between religious reformations and new media technologies? Such questions and others beg the deeper question: can religion exist outside media? These are some of the questions that will get us going this semester, as we explore the interrelations between religious traditions and media.

In the first instance, we will work to set the record straight: *media* is a plural noun that includes orality and printed texts as much as it does the "news media" and/or the "new media": Media don't have to be plugged into a wall, and this fact has deep implications for the history of religions. This course will investigate the plurality of media, historicizing them so as to better chart their influence in social and religious change. The first few weeks of the term will stretch way back to a time before printing and even writing, to reimagine a primarily "oral culture." The invention of writing, and later printing, will allow us a chance to rethink how religious traditions operate in relation to new media. We will then turn to apply this history to contemporary relations between media and religion, including the presence of religion *in* photography, video games, film, and the Internet; the use of new media technologies *in* religious worship services; and the function of religion in the contemporary Presidential elections.

### Course Materials:

Students will need to purchase the following books, available in the bookstore:

- Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy* (Ong)
- Other texts will be made available online through Blackboard (BB)

### Course Requirements and Grade Distribution:

There are 1000 points possible in this class. The breakdown is as follows...

**Presence:** (25% of the final grade=250points) This grade includes attendance and participation, but entails a more general sense of bringing both body and mind to the classroom for discussions. There are readings or other assignments for every day of class (listed below) and you are required to have read *before* class, and to be prepared to discuss the readings. "Presence" means not coming to class and asking what you were *supposed* to have read; "presence" means listening to the others in the classroom; "presence" means not checking your watch every 10 minutes; "presence" means, to use the title of a great religious film, "being there."

This course is small and therefore relies on informed comments by students on a regular basis. The grade for presence includes attendance (see below). The grade also entails that students have read assigned readings *before* class, and come prepared to discuss the readings. You will be graded on your ability to analyze and synthesize assignments; on the frequency, relevance and insights of your comments; and on your ability to present your ideas coherently to the class. Presence grades will be calculated from: 1) my own notes from class sessions, in which I note who was significantly involved in discussion, 2) your own self-assessment of your contributions to class discussion, and 3) your assessment of others in the class (more about this in class). Assessment will occur twice during the semester, and I will calculate your presence grades based on the three components listed here at that time and report them back to you.

Attendance will be taken every day. Each student begins with 250 points for presence. Unexcused absences will lower your presence grade as follows:

1 absence	0 points deducted	
2 absences	10 points deducted	
3 absences	20 point deducted	
4 absences	30 points deducted	Etc...

Late Arrivals: Each late arrival will count as ½ an absence. So, if you are late 4 times during the term, your grade will begin to go down.

Finally: You are expected to treat this classroom as if you were on an airline flight: That is, all electronic devices must be turned off and safely stowed away for the duration of our flights. Cell phones will not be tolerated in this classroom, and laptops are not allowed. A ringing phone during class will result in that student being marked absent for the day.

**Critical Response Paragraphs (CRPs)**: (15% of final grade=150pts) Due every Wed, except as marked. Every week is for the most part a "unit." Prof Plate will spend a bit more time lecturing on Mondays, offering outlines and expansions of the themes and readings for the week, though you are encouraged to contribute, ask questions, and even interrupt (politely). On Wednesdays, I expect to have more of a conversation through our class session. To facilitate this, I ask you each to prepare a two-paragraph response (about 200 words) to readings, viewings, hearings, conversations, and lectures for the week. This is **not** a "book report," but should instead hone in on what you see as the central issue/theme/problem for the week, and offer a brief but thoughtful response. You should also include one or two critical questions that the week's readings raise and that will help our in-class discussion. Print your CRP ahead of time and bring to class (double space, but make it fit on a single sheet of paper). You will turn this in to Prof Plate at the end of Wed's sessions.

**Short Critical Reaction Papers (sCRPs)**: (30% of final grade; 100pts each) **Three** of these are due through the term, and must be submitted via Blackboard. As with the weekly responses, these need to be critical, responding to particular material and demonstrating your ability to take insights from the class and apply them to life **beyond** the classroom, and in "the media."

The first **two** of the sCRPs will be on topics of your own choosing. For example, in the schedule below I've given a few of the very important holidays ("holy days") for Islam and Judaism through this fall. A leading question might be: How did journalistic media cover the Hajj? Or, Yom Kippur? *Was* there coverage? Or you might review a recent film (e.g., *Dark Knight*) or video game (e.g., *Halo*) or website (e.g., find online worship sites).

The final sCRP will be in relation to the November elections (can focus on Presidential, congressional, or local), and in relation to the presence and function of religion within the elections (Obama on

the cover of *New Yorker*, or his engagements with his former pastor in Chicago, McCain's seeming "lack" of religious affiliation, etc.)

The bare bones: These should be 3-4pp each: 800-1200words (put word count at the bottom of the paper); double spaced; well-written. We'll spend part of one class early in the term dedicated to more detail of these assignments and, as always, feel free to ask Prof Plate about this. **Due Dates**: Mon 6 Oct; Mon 3 Nov; Mon 1 Dec

**Final Project**: (30% of final grade: 300pts total: 200 for individual contribution; 100 for collaboration; grade will be determined collectively) Ideally done collaboratively. We'll discuss this in class, and see what talents students have. I'm thinking about possibly creating a website or, more boldly, creating a religious environment in Second Life.

### **Blackboard**

I will be making use of Blackboard through the semester to post readings, links to websites, etc. Please be sure to bookmark that site. Also, if I have to send an update to the syllabus or assignments, I will send it to your Hamilton email address. You will therefore need to check that on a regular basis.

### **Statement on Disabilities**

Prof Plate will work with any students with disabilities as need be. Students should contact Prof Plate **in the first two weeks of class** to discuss any specific needs, and should have already spoken with Dean Harrison ([aharriso@hamilton.edu](mailto:aharriso@hamilton.edu)) about this. If in question, feel free to contact Prof Plate.

## Course Schedule

{NOTE: the readings are subject to change. Please check with Prof Plate and/or Blackboard for updates.}

<b><u>Introductions</u></b>
M 1 Sept - Introductions, syllabus, etc. In Class: Read Ong, 172-174 {US Labor Day; Ramadan begins}
W 3 Sept - Readings: Plate from <i>Representing Religion in World Cinema</i> , pp. 1-10 (BB) <b>First CRP due.</b>
<b><u>Orality</u></b>
M 8 Sept - Readings: Ong, 1-30
W 10 Sep - Readings: Ong, 31-76 <b>Second CRP Due.</b>
M 15 Sep - Readings: F.E. Peters, "The Poet in Performance" in <i>Sacred: Books of the Three Faiths</i> (BB) In Class: listenings to the Quran
W 17 Sep - Readings: Hirschkind, in Meyer, <i>Religion, Media, and the Public Sphere</i> (BB) In Class: cassettes in Islam <b>Third CRP Due.</b>
<b><u>Literacy</u></b>
M 22 Sep - Readings: Ong, 77-114. In Class: Writing, the Alphabet Stuff on writing systems, pictograms, etc.
W 24 Sep - Readings: Ong, 115 - 135 <b>Fourth CRP Due</b>
M 29 Sep - Meet in the library, Clark room to look at books. {Rosh Hashanah begins at sunset (1st of Tishrei, 5769)}

W 1 Oct - More on Texts, including the Syracuse Iconic Books project, etc. Illuminated and illustrated., Printing, Texts, closures {Eid al-Fitr, the end of Ramadan} <b>Fifth CRP Due</b>
M 6 Oct - Word and Image in books. Readings TBA <b>sCRP #1 Due submitted by 5.00pm via Blackboard</b>
W 8 Oct - Word and Image in books. Readings TBA <b>Sixth CRP Due</b> {Yom Kippur begins at sunset}
<b><u>Imagistic Media</u></b>
M 13 Oct - <b>Photography:</b> Readings: from Susan Sontag (BB) {sukkot begins at sunset}
W 15 Oct - <b>Photography:</b> Readings: John Harvey, Intro to <i>Photography and Spirit</i> (BB) <b>Seventh CRP Due</b> {Fall recess begins at 4.00}
M 20 Oct - <b>Film:</b> Readings: Plate, from <i>Religion and Film</i>
W 22 Oct - <b>Film:</b> Watch <i>Baraka</i> in class <b>Eighth CRP Due</b>
M 27 Oct - <b>Television:</b> Readings, TBA
W 29 Oct - <b>Television News:</b> Readings, TBA <b>Ninth CRP Due</b>
<b><u>Religion and the Presidential Elections</u></b>
M 3 Nov - No Class Today (Prof Plate is outta town) <b>sCRP #2 Due (Submitted by 5.00pm via Blackboard)</b>

W 5 Nov - Readings: TBA <b>Tenth CRP Due</b>
M 10 Nov - The US Presidential Elections, recap. Readings from recent news media
W 12 Nov - Guest lecture by Jeff Sharlet, NYU. <b>Eleventh CRP Due</b>
<b><u>The Internet</u></b>
M 17 Nov - Readings: "Introduction" to Paolo Apolito, <i>Internet and the Madonna</i> (BB); Heidi Campbell, "Who's Got the Power?" (BB)
W 19 Nov - Readings: Heidi Campbell on Internet communities (BB) <b>Twelfth CRP Due</b>
M 24 - 28 Nov - NO CLASS - THANKSGIVING BREAK
M 1 Dec - Sacred Texting. Readings: Rachel Wagner, "Sacred Texting" (BB) <b>sCRP #3 Due</b>
W 3 Dec - Stephen Jacobs, on "Virtually Sacred" (BB) <b>Thirteenth CRP Due</b>
<b><u>Final Presentations</u></b>
M 8 Dec - In Class presentations of final project in Second Life {Eid al-Adha, "Feast of the Sacrifice"}
W 10 Dec - In Class presentations of final project in Second Life Last Day of Class