

**Syllabus Religion, Politics, and Society**  
Spring 2024, 21:510:460  
Rutgers University-Newark

**INSTRUCTOR**

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**COURSE DESCRIPTION**

In this class, students investigate how religious traditions intersect with social and political identities and movements in modernity. We begin by investigating the category of “religion” and considering our own preconceptions. We then proceed through several case studies, examining articulations of Islam in black communities, claims about inequality within Hinduism, the legal and social struggles for recognition within African and indigenous religions in America, and more. By design, each case study showcases a different aspect of religion in social life. Students can expect to gain a nuanced understanding of the manifestations of religion in public life for different communities.

**LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

- Prompt students to think critically and with empathy about religious traditions.
- Equip students to write about religions, politics, and social movements from a critical perspective.
- Further cultivate each student’s grasp of historical method.
- Learn how to make convincing academic arguments and piece together evidence in pursuit of larger points.
- Develop writing skills such that students can express complicated ideas in clear, compelling prose.

**REQUIRED TEXTS**

Alex Haley, *Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965)  
Donald Lopez, *Buddhism and Science* (2008)  
Tomoko Masuzawa, *Invention of World Religions* (2005)

All other readings are in the course reader.

**GRADING AND ASSIGNMENTS**

4 essays	15 percent of final grade each
Class attendance / participation	30 percent of final grade
Class presentation	10 percent of final grade

**Essays.** Each essay should be approximately four–five pages double-spaced (1,000–1,250 words). It should advance a critical analysis or argument based on the assigned readings in that section. You need not summarize all the readings; rather, I am looking for serious intellectual engagement with the material; include citations (APA or MLA style, as you like).

**Class Attendance / Participation.** You should come to class having carefully read all listed readings for that day and ready to talk about them.

**Class Presentation.** Each student will present once during the semester. The presentation should be 5–7 minutes and highlight (1) some of the key takeaways from that day’s readings, (2) at least one connection with prior readings or things we have discussed in class, and (3) a couple of discussion questions to guide our class conversation.

## **Section 1: Getting our Grounding**

**Jan 18 Introduction: What is Religion? What is Politics? What is Society?**  
[no assigned readings]

**Jan 23 How Scholars Think About Religion**  
Smith “Religion, Religions, Religious”  
Nye, *Religion: The Basics*, introduction  
Masuzawa, *Invention of World Religions*, introduction

**Jan 25 Colonizing and Decolonizing Religion**  
Masuzawa, *Invention of World Religions*, chaps. 1–2  
Nye, “Decolonizing the Study of Religion”

## **Section 2: Buddhism, Science, and Violence**

**Jan 30 Buddhists at the World Parliament of Religions**  
Masuzawa, *Invention of World Religions*, chaps. 3–4  
Lopez, *Buddhism and Science*, introduction

**Feb 1 Buddhism and Science 1**  
Lopez, *Buddhism and Science*, chaps. 1–3

**Feb 6 Buddhism and Science 2**  
Lopez, *Buddhism and Science*, chaps. 4–5 and conclusion

**Feb 13 Buddhism and Violence**  
Arnold and Turner, “Why Are We Surprised When Buddhists Are Violent?”  
Jerryson and Juergensmeyer, *Buddhist Warfare*, introduction  
Jerryson, “Militarizing Buddhism”  
\*essay 1 due

## **Section 3: Islam, Conversion, and America**

### **Feb 15 Islam as a World Religion**

Masuzawa, *Invention of World Religions*, chaps. 5–7

### **Feb 20 Islam as a Black American Religion**

GhaneaBassiri, “Islamophobia and American History”

Curtis, “Black Muslim Scare”

### **Feb 27 Conversion 1**

Haley, *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, chaps. 1–7

Wenger, *Religious Freedom*, chap. 5

### **Feb 29 Conversion 2**

Haley, *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, chaps. 8–14

Friedman and Sommers, “Solitary confinement and the Nation of Islam”

### **March 5 Conversion 3**

Haley, *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, chaps. 15–19

\*essay 2 due

## **Section 4: Hinduism, Caste, and Nationalism**

### **March 12 Hinduism on the World Stage**

Masuzawa, *Invention of World Religions*, chaps. 8

Vivekananda, speech at the 1893 Parliament of World Religions

Ramabai, *A High-Caste Hindu Woman*, preface

### **March 19 Caste and Rejecting Hinduism 1**

Ilaiah, *Why I am not a Hindu?*, chap. 1

Begin Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*

### **March 21 Caste and Rejecting Hinduism 2**

Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*

### **March 26 Hindu nationalism**

Jaffrelot (ed), *Hindu Nationalism: Reader*, introduction

Savarkar excerpts in Jaffrelot (ed), *Hindu Nationalism: Reader*

Gandhi, “Hindutva and the Shared Scripts of the Global Right”

\*essay 3 due

## **Section 5: What Doesn't Count as Religion**

### **April 9 Black Americans: Christianity, Magic, and Voudou**

Chireau, "Conjure and Christianity"

Clark, "19th Century New Orleans Voudou"

### **April 11 Native American Religions**

McNally, *Defend the Sacred*, introduction and chap. 3

Gandhi, "Hindutva and the Shared Scripts of the Global Right"

### **April 16 Atheism**

Baggett, *Varieties of the Nonreligious Experience*, chaps. 1–2

### **April 23 Racializing Muslims**

Kumar, *Islamophobia*, chaps. 8–9

### **April 25 Wrap-up Day**

\*essay 4 due