“Religion and Ways of Knowing” encompasses two related but distinct questions: “How do religious people know?” and “How do we know religion?” And of course the distinction blurs if “we” or any one of us is religious.

Throughout the semester, we examine some of the very different ways in which human beings, in the past and in the present, in our culture and in others, have experienced themselves as knowing something, knowing something that, as “religious,” usually transcends the boundaries of empirically gained and verifiable knowledge.

Although "knowing religion," may seem obvious (don't we know it when we see it?), in fact, the problems of defining religion, distinguishing religious from non-religious behavior, and understanding the complex and very diverse ways that human beings have created and transmitted religious belief and practice, have engaged many of the great thinkers of the modern West, and continue to challenge our everyday life in a very religiously diverse world. Part of this challenge lies in the fact that religious people have practiced very diverse ways of constructing and embodying what they understand to be truth. It is this dual focus—how do we know, and how do religious people know—that we will explore throughout the semester.

In pursuing these questions, we will necessarily be engaging questions about the diversity of human experience. These questions will flow from the fact of religious diversity both in the materials we examine and in the varying positions from which we engage these materials. Although any study of religion at the University of Vermont is necessarily a secular endeavor, religious diversity in the classroom and in the broader culture will shape our questions and ideas. Becoming aware of these perspectives and understanding their impact is part of our work. Secondly, the materials that we will explore will take us into different religious cultures. And because we will study how religion is fundamentally as much about bodily practices as it is about beliefs, all of our studies will illuminate how gender is a part of the construction, embodiment, and transmission of religious knowledge. And because religion is always about identity formation for the individual and boundary formation for the community, all of our studies will illuminate the processes by which difference (ethnic, racial, religious) is constructed. Our case studies will include the religious worlds of free and enslaved Blacks in nineteenth-America, contemporary American evangelical Christians, South Asian and Western Buddhists, and the Black Atlantic diaspora of Nigerian-based religion and modern Western Jews.
Questions we will address in this course:

- How have people in different religious communities experienced themselves as knowing religious truth? What processes have they participated in to create that knowledge?
- How can we understand diversity within a religious community? How does religious engagement construct difference within a community, e.g., gender difference, ethnic difference, racial difference?
- What are advantages and disadvantages of using general terms (e.g., Christianity) to categorize very different religious communities (e.g., 19th-century African Americans, contemporary white Americans)? How can we understand the role of historical changes and difference when discussing religion?
- How have religious communities created boundaries to distinguish themselves from others? How have religious communities reacted to marginalization from religious or secular others?

Course objectives:

- Students will develop critical reading and thinking skills.
- Students will practice and improve their writing and oral presentation skills.
- Students will develop skills for constructively working on group projects.
- Students will develop skills for respectfully discussing religious diversity and for critically understanding how religions participate in broader cultural dynamics that reproduce or contest difference and inequality.

Course requirements:

This syllabus indicates the readings and basic schedule of assignments. Some reading assignments and dates may be changed as deemed necessary by the instructor. All assignments must be completed; work submitted late is penalized.

- Thoughtful preparation for class based on careful reading of the materials, and constructive engagement in the class discussions. This presumes regular attendance in class—you are expected to attend and participate in all classes unless a documented situation such as serious illness or family emergency arises. Class dates given below list readings that must be prepared before coming to class. Full, constructive participation in the group project is also part of this requirement, as well as regular attendance at plenary sessions.
- Homework. There will usually be homework for each class meeting. Questions about the assigned readings will be posted, and responses will be entered in the Homework Journal on Blackboard. This homework must be posted by 7:00 am on the day that it is due. NB: compose your response in a Word document, then paste the text into the journal page. Do not compose on the journal page, and do not attach your document as an attachment.
- Two essays. Each essay will be a 4-5 page, take-home essay developed in response to questions distributed one week before the due dates (February 17 and March 23). These essays will be based on materials assigned in class.
- Burlington Religious Communities research project. For your final project, you will work in small groups to examine the production, transmission, and experience of religious knowing in a religious community in the Burlington area.
This project will involve research on the history and sources of authority for the
community, observation of rituals, and interviews with community
representatives. In addition to shorter, scaffolding assignments, there will be two
major products of this research: a group poster and research presentations (April
12, 19, and 26), and a final, individually written essay. Detailed directions about
the various components of this project will be given throughout the semester.

**Grading:**

- Participation (in class and group project): 15%
- Homework/reading journal: 20%
- Essays: 20% each
- Research Project:
  - Group grade for poster and presentation: 10%
  - Individual grade for research paper: 15%

**Course Materials:**

It is the responsibility of all students to ensure that they have acquired the necessary
materials in time to read them carefully before class. This includes access to
computer, printer, and software to allow you to use the materials on Blackboard (BB) and
the Internet. Computers with appropriate software and printers are available in the
Bailey/Howe Library. If you choose to use your own equipment, especially from off
campus, make sure that you can take the necessary steps to have timely access.

The following books have been ordered at the University Book Store:

  University Press, 1996.
- Luhrmann, T. M. *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American

Other readings are available on BB or on the Internet.

**Academic Honesty:** As in every class, you are bound to observe the standards of
academic honesty that are part of the University policy. You are responsible for knowing
what plagiarism is and for knowing the standard techniques for adequate documentation
in your writing. You are responsible for submitting only your work as your own. Any
suspected case of any type of academic dishonesty will be handled according to the
procedures described in the University policy.

**Religious Holidays:** Students have the right to practice the religion of their choice. Each
semester students should submit in writing to their instructors by the end of the second full
week of classes their documented religious holiday schedule for the semester. Faculty
must permit students who miss work for the purpose of religious observance to make up
this work.
Copyright: Some of the material on the Blackboard course Website is subject to copyright restrictions; it is made available exclusively to students enrolled in this class and only for instructional purposes. “Fair use” allows you to make one copy of the material for personal reading, research, or education. For the details of “fair use” of copyrighted materials, see: http://library.uvm.edu/services/reserves/ereserveguide.php

Classroom Culture: Turn off and put away all phones. No screens in class unless you have been asked to bring a computer for a specific day’s assignment. Listen respectfully to each other even when you disagree. Respect the group and yourself enough to contribute responsibly to the discussions.

Schedule of Assignments:

What is religion?

Wednesday, January 18. Introduction.


Friday, January 20. Post your one-paragraph interview summary on Blackboard Discussion Board by Thursday (1/19) at midnight. There are three short readings due for Friday (1/20). There is a writing assignment posted on Blackboard Homework Assignments. Here are the readings:


Religion Imposed and Improvised


Thinking about Ritual

Wednesday, February 15. Library session: resources for research project.

**Wednesday, February 15, 5:05-6:20.** Plenary session. Professor Anne Fausto-Sterling, Biology, Brown University. “Acquiring Gender: From Baby in the Yellow Hat to Gender Identity and Expression.” Billings Lecture Hall.


Monday, February 20. No classes: Presidents’ Day.

What is Religion (Again!)?
Wednesday, February 22. Readings TBA.


Religious Knowing in a Secular World

Monday, March 6. Research project workshop.

**Buddhism, Meditation, and Gender**


Monday, March 13-Friday, March 17. No classes: Spring break


**Wednesday, March 22, 5:05-6:20.** Plenary session. “How to Create Your HCOL 086 Poster.” Billings Lecture Hall.

Thursday, March 23. Second essay due in my mailbox (481 Main Street, 1st floor) by 5:00 pm.


Monday, March 27 – Friday, April 7. Research project work.

**Wednesday, March 30.** Ritual observation report due.

**Sunday, April 9.** Final version of poster due, sent to me by midnight, via email.

Monday, April 10-Wednesday, April 12. Research presentation rehearsals.

**Wednesday, April 12, 5:05-6:20.** Plenary session: Group Research Presentations. Votey Hall, room 209.

**When Religious Knowledge Fails**

**Friday, April 14.** Book of Job. *Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1985). **BB.** [The Book of Job is found in any Jewish or Christian Bible. You may use another translation if you already have access to a different Bible.]


**Misunderstanding the Other**


Friday, April 28. READINGS TBA.

**Retrospective and Conclusion**

Monday, May 1-Wednesday, May 5. Readings TBA.

Monday, May 8. Research essay due in my mailbox (at 481 Main Street) by noon.