Course Description

It’s one of the most influential books in human history, but what is it? We will explore how the Jewish and Christian Bibles were produced in the communities of ancient Israel and the Christian movement, as those people grappled with the deepest problems of existence.

This course will serve as an introduction to the study of religion through an examination of selected biblical and related texts and the cultures that produced and preserved these texts. Throughout the course, we will ask questions about the nature of religion and about understanding the religious expressions of people of other cultures and historical periods. We will examine the religious beliefs of the peoples of the ancient Babylon, then turn to our major focus on the development of ancient Israel and the emergence of the Christian movement. In looking at each of these closely related yet strikingly diverse religious cultures, we will try to understand how the evidence of their beliefs and practices allows us to construct a picture of what we call religion.

In investigating these religious traditions, we will examine how the identity of each community was articulated, especially in terms of boundaries defining insiders and outsiders. We will consider how people engaged religious symbols to organize their societies, including aspects of personal identity and social hierarchies. Our investigations will begin with the problem of defining religion and the ways in which our own position in the 21st-century West must be examined so that we can both see very different ways of formulating the nature of reality and refrain from assuming an inherent bias against the past (e.g., as “backward”) or religion (e.g., “as irrational or superstitious”).

Problems we will address in this course include:
- What are my assumptions about religion and about bible?
- How do my assumptions shape my learning?
- What is possible to know about the people who wrote texts that became bible?
- How is that knowledge derived--what are the sources for it?
- How can I read a text to learn about its making?
- How can I read a text to learn about the beliefs of its author and/or audience?
- What should I think about apparent contradictions within a religious text?
- What role can a text have in religious community?
- What is religion?
Learning Objectives:
- An informed and critical understanding of the formation of early Judaism and Christianity, including basic beliefs, practices, and historical development.
- An informed understanding of some key categories in the study of religion.
- An ability to read and analyze a diverse collection of primary and secondary texts.
- An ability to communicate effectively through writing and oral presentation.
- An ability to effectively conduct research using appropriate print and digital sources.
- An ability to participate effectively in an academic community dedicated to the ideals of honest inquiry and mutual understanding.

Course requirements and grading:
- Attendance, class preparation, and participation. Students are required to do all the readings according to the schedule given below. Other brief readings may be added as needed. All assigned readings must be done in preparation for the class discussion and the Study Guide should be used in this preparation. Because informed participation in class discussions is required in this course, regular attendance in class is also required and students are responsible for all material covered and assignments made in class. There is no quota of “allowable” absences. If you are missing classes, it will have an impact on your grade, both in terms of the quality of work that you do and in the attendance and participation percentage of the final grade. If you miss classes for serious cause, your Dean’s Office will inform me and we can make arrangements for handling your absences. Class attendance and participation also means attentive listening and respectful engagement; no texting, email, internet use, or non-class activity during class time. Turn off phones during class. (20% of final grade).
- Quizzes on assigned readings (20% of grade). Also included in this grade will be at least one brief oral presentation.
- Regular writing assignments due throughout the semester. These will be short papers (about 1-2 pages) comprised of essays or critical reflection papers, library assignments, or rewrites of earlier papers (30% of grade).
- Research project (30% of grade). Directions will be distributed.
- Additional homework will be given at instructor's discretion and results will be factored into the final grade.

I have compiled a hand-out with tips for writing for this course. It is posted on Blackboard (BB). Read it carefully (and frequently) to familiarize yourself with common problems in written expression, and use it to check your own writing. Do not expect to get the highest grades for your written assignments if they include the problems described on the writing tips hand-out.

Failure to complete as required any one or more of the course requirements may lead to failure of the course.
Academic Honesty: As in every class, you are bound to observe the standards of academic honesty that are part of the University policy (See The Code of Academic Integrity, posted on the web-page of the Center for Student Ethics and Standards: http://www.uvm.edu/cses/?Page=ah.html&SM=menu-programs.html). 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. Writing assignments for this course are not collaborative; each student must do his or her own particular work. Any suspected case of any type of academic dishonesty will be handled according to the procedures described in The Code of Academic Integrity.

Guidelines for behavior in Arts and Sciences courses:
1. Students are expected to attend and be prepared for all regularly scheduled classes.
2. Students are expected to arrive on time and stay in class until the class period ends. If a student knows in advance that he or she will need to leave early, the faculty member should be notified before the class period begins.
3. Students are expected to treat faculty and fellow students with respect. For example, students must not disrupt the class by ostentatiously not paying attention or by leaving and reentering the classroom during the class period. Actions that distract the class from the work at hand are not acceptable. It is expected that students will pay respectful attention to comments made by the lecturer and by fellow students.

Behavior that departs from these guidelines as well as any additional guidelines specific to this course is not acceptable and may be cause for disciplinary action.

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.

Student Learning Accommodations: In keeping with University policy, any student with a documented disability interested in utilizing accommodations should contact Student Accessibility Services. SAS works with students and faculty in an interactive process to explore reasonable and appropriate accommodations via an accommodation letter to faculty with recommended accommodations as early as possible each semester. Contact SAS: A170 Living/Learning Center; 802-656-7753; access@uvm.edu; or www.uvm.edu/access.

Other student policies may be found at http://www.uvm.edu/policies/?Page=cats.php&cat=St&SM=cat_menu.php

Course Materials: The following book can be purchased at the University Store: Bible: New Revised Standard Version with Apocrypha (Hendrickson Publishers). When we are discussing biblical texts, you must bring it to class. Printing out specific books from Internet Bibles will not suffice, because discussions often include reference to other books. You may use other translations or editions of the Bible. Some are better
than others; most are fine; some are not. If you have a question about a particular Bible, ask me. This same translation ordered for the class (NRSV) is also available in an annotated version that has more extensive introductions and notes. This is the *New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version* (ISBN: 0195289609). If you are interested in acquiring this more extensive (and more expensive) edition, it is easily available through Amazon.com and other outlets.

All other course materials, including the *Study Guide*, are available on Blackboard (BB). **It is most highly recommended that you download and print out** the materials from BB. We will be discussing them in class so it is to your advantage to bring a copy to class, and having your own hard copy will facilitate preparation for discussion and quizzes. **It is the responsibility of all students to ensure that they have acquired the necessary materials in time to read them carefully before class.** You will need access to a networked computer, printer, and necessary software to allow you to use the materials on BB. 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 do the necessary steps to have timely access.

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**Schedule of Assignments:**

Before each reading, consult the *Study Guide* for background information, study questions, etc. The *Study Guide* is found on BB.

**Week 1. August 28-September 1. What is religion?**


*Friday:* Three articles:


**Week 2. September 4-8. What is the Bible and how can it be studied?**

*Monday:* University holiday—no class meeting.

Friday: Russell T. McCutcheon, “What is the Academic Study of Religion?” BB.

NOTE: ADD/DROP deadline for all classes is Monday, September 11.


Weeks 4-6. September 18-October 6. Torah: The Creation of Israel’s Identity
Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus. (Specific chapters will be assigned for each class meeting.)
Friday, September 22: Library session with Patricia Mardeusz—meet in Bailey/Howe Library.
Friday, October 6: Annotated bibliography due.

Monday: No classes—Fall recess.

Week 8. October 16-20. Questioning Israel's Traditions.
Monday-Wednesday: Book of Job.
Friday: Research writing workshop.

Monday: Jaffee, Early Judaism, pp. 34-53 (see above, Week 3).
Wednesday: Research Essay due.

NOTE: The last day to withdraw from a class is Monday, October 30.

Friday, November 3-Friday, November 10: Matthew

Week 12. November 13-17. Who was the historical Jesus?

**Monday: Research Essay Rewrite due.**


**Friday:** No new reading. Documentary screening: *From Jesus to Christ: The First Christians.* Part Two. (This will serve as an introduction to Paul and 1 Corinthians.)


*Monday and Wednesday:* 1 Corinthians.


**Week 15. December 4-8. Envisioning the End.**

*Monday and Wednesday:* Oral reports in class.

*Friday:* Retrospective and Conclusion.