

**Katherine A. Dugan**  
**Sample Syllabus: Introduction to Religious Studies**

Monday, Wednesday, Friday, 9-9:50  
Office Hours: Wednesdays 2-4pm  
Virtual Office Hours: Thursdays 8-9pm  
kdugan@northwestern.edu

This course is an introduction to the academic study of religion, which means it is an introduction to the way people think, talk, and analyze about religion(s). “Religion,” as we will study it this semester, is not a fixed and unchanging entity, but a way of being in the world that is affected by social, cultural, and historical perspectives. Religious Studies is the work of studying it. Religious Studies demands that we take care with our definitions, we work to understand classifications of religion, and that we use data from religion as it is lived to complicate and challenge our assumptions and explanations of religion. To study religion is to study a complex and messy dimension of human life. Welcome!

This class asks you to think open-mindedly and creatively about religion. We may study ideas or people or traditions that are surprising to you. You may encounter worldviews with which you disagree. Be prepared to think with this material. I look forward to hearing and reading how you engage perspectives you may not have encountered before.

This class begins with a brief historical overview of how religion has been studied and what is at stake in studying religion. Part I is an introduction to five of the world’s religions. Part II studies themes in the study of religion. During this part of the course, we turn our attention to four contemporary cases of dispute over what religion is, why it matters, and how it affects daily life. Each case study will help us think through a particular theme in Religious Studies: belief, sacred, prayer and ritual, gender. We will analyze the case studies through these terms. After each case study, students will submit a mini-project on the case study—a blog post, an image with analysis, religious service observation, and a series of tweets. Through this study, students will gain a foundation in the academic study of religion.

**Learning Objectives**

One of the primary goals of this course is that you examine some of the assumptions you have about religion. Toward that goal, this class has five objectives. Member of this class will:

- Analyze several working definitions of, and approaches to, “religion.”
- Understand some of the history of the academic study of religion, including how others have defined, classified, and explained religion.
- Develop working knowledge of five of the world’s religions, including their central tenets, practices, and contemporary iterations.
- Investigate major themes in Religious Studies through case studies in American religious life.
- Create multiple explanations for how religious practitioners live their religion in daily life.

## **Readings**

Required Book: *Living Religions* (9<sup>th</sup> edition) by Mary Pat Fisher

All of the other course readings will be accessible as an e-course pack on our course website.

## **Assessment**

### **Participation and Attendance (5%)**

Your attendance grade will be based on both you being in class and the quality of your participation in class. I understand that some people have difficulty discussing texts and ideas in class. If this is true for you, please let me know. I am open to discussing other ways for you to be participating in the course. I will take attendance at each class meeting. If you have to miss a class, please email me 24 hours in advance (if possible). If you miss more than two meetings, please plan to meet with me to make sure you are able to participate fully in the class.

### **Assignments:**

*I will provide rubrics at least a week before each assignment is due. Due dates are firm. Please discuss with me at least 24 hours before deadline if you anticipate having trouble meeting it. When you submit written work, please use size 12, Times New Roman with 1" margins. Submit all your work on the course website.*

### **Short Memo on “Religion” (10%)**

The first two weeks of the class are an introduction to the study of religion. We will discuss how to define religion and how people have studied it. As a way of synthesizing your thinking, write a short (2 pages) memo answering this question: If you were to explain religion to an alien, how would you describe it?

Due: End of Week 2

### **Midterm (25%)**

After we finish review five of the world’s religions, there will be an in-class exam that will ask you to know key terms and ideas in each tradition. The exam will include term identification, short answers, and two longer essay questions.

In-Class: End of Week 7

### **Case Studies Work (40%)**

#### **1. “Belief” Assignment: Blog post, 300-400 words (10%)**

Due: End of Week 9

Our discussion of what belief is and how it matters (or doesn’t) in religion will begin with a 1999 court case in Florida over religious displays in a public cemetery. This assignment asks you to write a 300-400-word blog post about the case through the lens of our study of belief. You might answer: Why did the judge decide to use “belief” as a standard? What other standards might the judge have used? How does (or does not) “belief” determine religion? If you were the judge in the case, how would you have dealt with belief in this case?

#### **2. “Sacred” Assignment: Image and analysis, 300-400 words (10%)**

Due: End of Week 11

As we study the case of whether or not a church is allowed to become a mosque, we will study the role of sacred space. In this assignment, you will find an image of some object or

place or person that is considered “sacred.” Present the image with a 300-400 word description of why this thing is object, to whom, and how it became marked that way.

3. **“Prayer and Ritual” Assignment: Observation Memo**, 750 words (10%)

Due: End of Week 13

Religions and religious practitioners are often *doing* things that may or may not align with what they *say* about their religious practices. This makes observing religious rituals and prayers very important. This assignment is in two parts. First, you will observe a religious service. This can be of a tradition with which you are familiar, or one that is foreign to you. We will talk more about the guidelines of how to do this, but think about this as anthropological research. This is a chance to observe religious ritual in action. Second, you will write a short paper wherein you describe the service and analyze it through the lens of prayer and ritual in this section of the course.

4. **“Gender” Assignment: Ten Tweets** (10%)

Due: End of Week 15.

In this assignment, you will assume the persona of a student of religion and gender. You have just had coffee with Asra Nomani. Write ten tweets wherein you describe what she said to you about being a Muslim woman, about her relationship to Friday prayer, and/or her understanding of the role of women in Islamic conceptions of authority. Use the tools of gender analysis from our discussion.

**Final Essay**, 6 pages (20%)

Due: Finals Week

The final paper for this course is a synthesis of the themes of the semester. You will choose a religious tradition from Part I, an approach to studying religion from the Introduction, and a theme/term from Part II. Conduct some research to find an example of this theme in contemporary life (I’m happy to offer suggestions). Describe the case study, explore how it illustrates some questions from the theme and analyze it from the perspective of the study of religion you have chosen. This essay should reflect both your carefully and well-informed ideas about studying religion. You must critically engage at least **five readings** from the course.

## Course Outline

### **Introduction to the Study of Religion**

#### **Week 1. Introductions**

- What are we studying? What is religion? Why are we studying it? How can/ought we study it?
- What are some critical questions in the study of religion? What's at stake in studying religion? What is the history of people studying religion?

#### **Week 2. Studying Religion**

- *Living Religions*, Chapter 1
- Introduction to four theories of religion: Durkheim, Weber, James, Eliade
- Introduction to the four themes of the semester

**\*\*Due:** Short Memo on "Religion"

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### **Part I: World's Religions**

Our brief introduction to five of the world's religions will each have three themes. Mondays will introduce the history and central tenets of the traditions. Wednesdays will introduce primary modes of prayer (including any sacred texts) and ritual. Fridays will introduce the tradition in contemporary life.

#### **Week 3. Hinduism**

- *Living Religions*, Chapter 3.
- Excerpts from the *Rg-Veda* and the *Brhadāranyaka Upanisad* in *Hindu Scriptures* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), pp. 3-9, 78-81.

#### **Week 4. Buddhism**

- *Living Religions*, Chapter 5.
- "The Noble Search," from *Ariyapariyesanāna Sutta, Majjhima Nikāya* in *Buddhist Scriptures* (London: Penguin 2004), pp. 105-115.

#### **Week 5. Judaism**

- *Living Religions*, Chapter 8.
- Excerpts from tractate *Shabbat*, from *The Talmud: A Selection* (London: Penguin, 2009), pp. 95-107 and 113-123.

#### **Week 6. Christianity**

- *Living Religions*, Chapter 9.
- The Gospel of Mark (Revised Standard Version)
- Selections from statements on justification since Reformation (1) Martin Luther, "The Freedom of a Christian" from *Three Traditions* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), 277-316; (2) Council of Trent, "Decree on Justification" from *The Church Teaches: Documents of the Church in English Translation* (St. Louis: Herder, 1955), 230-36.

## Week 7. Islam

- *Living Religions*, Chapter 10.
- *Al Qur'ān: A Contemporary Translation*, trans. Ahmed Ali, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), surah 24: "The Light" and 57: "Iron," pp. 298-305
- Accounts of Muhammad's "Night Journey:" (1) surah 17, (2) al-Baghawi, *Masabih as-Sunna*, and (3) Muhammad's meeting with Allah, from *as-Suyuti's al-La aī al-masnu'sa*.

**\*\*In-class:** Midterm

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## Part II: Case Studies

### Belief

#### Week 8. Case study: Gravesites in Boca Raton, Florida

- Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom* (2005), "Introduction," "Chapter 1: Outlaw Religion," and Chapter 4: Legal Religion" pp. 1-31 and 89-137.
- What does "belief" look like? What constitutes religion in this case? Is there an acceptable and unacceptable version of religion? What assumptions do the judge, the plaintiff, and the defense make?



#### Week 9. Studying Belief

- Mark Taylor, *Critical Terms in Religious Studies* (1998), "Belief," pp. 21-35.
- Mini-lecture and in-class activity on Wilfred Cantwell Smith's *The Meaning and End of Religion* (1962).
- Re-thinking Boca Raton—In-class: What do we learn about the role of belief in religion from this case? How/does re-examining belief change your interpretation of the arguments for and against the gravesites?

**\*\*Due:** "Belief" Assignment

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### Sacred

#### Week 10. Case study: "A Mosque in Palos Heights"

- Eleanor Pierce and The Pluralism Project, "Case Study: A Mosque in Palos Heights" (2007)

#### Week 11. Studying Sacred

- Emile Durkheim, Part II of Chapter I, "Definition of Religious Phenomena and of Religion," *The Elemental Forms of Religious Life* (1915, 2008) pp. 36-41.
- Talal Asad, "A Digression on the 'sacred' and the 'profane,'" in *Formations of the Secular* (2003), pp. 30-37.
- Matthew Cressler, "Ground Zero and the S-word," *Harvard Divinity School Bulletin* (Winter/Spring 2011): <http://bulletin.hds.harvard.edu/articles/winterspring2011/ground-zero-and-s-word>



Dean Koldenhoven, Mayor Palos Heights, IL in 2000.

- Re-thinking Palos Heights in-class: What was the relationship between the sacred and the profane in Palos Heights? What was sacred? What was profane? How did the building at the center of this debate move between these categories?

**\*\*Due:** “Sacred” Assignment.

### Prayer and Ritual

#### **Week 12.** Case Study: Learning Vineyard Christian Prayer

- T.M. Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God* (2012), “Chapter 1: The Invitation,” “Chapter 7: The Skill of Prayer,” and “Chapter 8: But Are they Crazy?” pp. 3-38; 189-266.



#### **Week 13.** Studying Prayer and Ritual

- J.Z. Smith, “The Bare Facts of Ritual” in *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (1982), pp. 53-65.
- Niloofar Haeri, “The Private Performance of *Salat* Prayers: Repetition, Time and Meaning” *Anthropology Quarterly* (Winter 2013), pp. 5-33.
- In-class study of Social Scientific Research Council’s “New Directions in the Study of Prayer.” Please bring computers or tablets to class
- Re-thinking Vineyard Christian Prayer in class: What is prayer? What are some of the factors that shape prayer experiences? How ought we compare and contrast prayer forms?

**\*\*Due:** “Prayer” Assignment.

### Gender

#### **Week 14.** Case Study: Muslim Women Leading Friday Prayer

- Juliane Hammer, *American Muslim Women, Religious Authority, and Activism: More Than a Prayer*, “Introduction,” “Chapter 1: A Woman-Led Friday Prayer: March 18, 2005” and “Chapter 2: Women Leading Prayers: Tracing the Debate,” pp. 1-55.
- Watch “The Mosque in Morgantown” (Available for streaming on the course website)



#### **Week 15.** Studying Gender and Religion

- Nye, “Gender,” in *Religion: The Basics* (2012), pp. 73-100
- Mary Farrell Bednarowski, *The Religious Imagination of American Women* (1999), Chapter 1: “American Women as Religious Thinkers: Dissenting Participants,” pp. 1-15.

- Saba Mahmood, “Rehearsed Spontaneity and the Conventionality of Ritual: Disciplines of *salāt*” in *American Ethnologist* 28 (2001), pp. 827-853.
- Re-thinking Women and religion in-class: How does studying Nomani’s Muslim identity from the perspective of gender shift how you think about religious identities? What is “agency” for Nomani? How ought we think about the intersection of class and ethnicity with gender and religion?

\*\*Due: “Gender” Assignment

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**Finals Week.** \*\*Final Essay Due.

### Other Notes

#### **Communication**

The primary way that I will communicate with you, outside of class, will be through our Canvas website. Please make sure your account settings are set to receive emails and course announcements. I am also easy to reach over email, [kdugan@northwestern.edu](mailto:kdugan@northwestern.edu). I reply to emails within 24 hours. If you haven’t received a reply from me, please send it again (sometimes emails do slip through the cracks, despite my best efforts!). I tend not to reply to email after 9pm, but I’ll get to it in the morning. Should you need me by phone, you can call me at (605) 868-1706, but please avoid using that number before 9am and after 8pm. I’m also available for office hours. Please do swing by to chit-chat about the class or ask questions about the assignments or to discuss how this class relates to others you are taking.

The most important thing to remember is to be in regular communication with me if your semester starts to get out of control. We can manage most things if I know about them as soon as they start affecting you and your work. Please don’t be embarrassed or ashamed to ask me for help. I’m happy to accommodate. At the same time, if you aren’t in touch and just stop showing up, I there is less and less I can do. Please don’t wait for an emergency to be in touch with me about your progress in the course.

#### **Academic Integrity**

You are expected to adhere to NU’s code of academic integrity. The university’s guidelines can be found under the “Principles Regarding Academic Integrity” at <http://www.northwestern.edu/uacc/uniprin.html>. These guidelines also include the university’s policy regarding plagiarism. Plagiarism is when you copy the work of someone else and try to pass it off as your own. It is not tolerated and will not be allowed in this course. If you are unclear about what counts as plagiarism, talk to me. For guidelines on how to avoid plagiarism visit <http://www.northwestern.edu/uacc/plagiar.html> and consult the Northwestern University Student Handbook downloadable at <http://www.northwestern.edu/handbook/>. All assignments must be uploaded to Turnitin to verify authorship. If plagiarism is detected, you will fail the assignment. I reserve the right to pursue further punitive measures.

#### **Resources for Students with Disabilities**

Northwestern University and AccessibleNU are committed to providing a supportive and challenging environment for all undergraduate, graduate, and professional school students with

disabilities who attend the University. Additionally, the University and AccessibleNU work to provide students with disabilities a learning and community environment that affords them full participation, equal access, and reasonable accommodation of their disabilities. The majority of accommodations and services for students with disabilities are coordinated by AccessibleNU. To know more and access information about Northwestern University commitment for Students with disabilities please visit AccessibleNU website at <http://www.northwestern.edu/disability/>.

### **Submitting Assignments**

Papers should be in **Times New Roman, size 12, with 1-inch margins and page numbers printed on each page**. Your critical, analytical, and thoughtful reading of texts or interviews or ethnographic materials should be supported by footnotes that include page-number references. Any reference style (e.g. Chicago, MLA) that is consistent and provides complete information is acceptable. Include a bibliography of all works cited or referenced.

**Submit all assignments via Canvas by the time they are due.**

### **Late Paper Policy**

Extensions for any assignments must be requested at least twenty-four hours in advance of the due date. Assignments for which no extensions have been granted will be penalized one-third of a letter grade for every day they are late, beginning immediately after the class during which they are due.

### **Grading Scale**

I grade on a 100-point scale and will keep your grades updated on the Canvas Gradebook.

A: 100-93	C+: 79-78
A-: 92-90	C: 77-73
B+: 89-87	C-: 72-70
B: 86-84	D: 69-60
B-: 83-80	F: Below 60

This syllabus reflects the plan of the course as of September 21, 2015. Subject to change.