

GONZAGA-IN-FLORENCE SYLLABUS

Course: RELI 200: Religion and Human Experience
Credits: 3 Credits
Instructor: Dr. J. K. Downey



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DESCRIPTION

We will explore some of the basic experiences, concepts, and challenges involved in being religious. But the course is not a catalogue of answers or a list of musty generalizations. It is an honest intellectual inquiry into the possibility of being intelligent and religious. Our course does not center on common sense readings of scriptures nor does it care about various catechisms or denominational personal revelations. Those are not the normal standards used for the public discussions of the scholarly community as it looks at religious experience. This course is an introduction to the limits, rules, and standards of evidence particular to the community of *academic* inquirers. The course proceeds by taking seriously some of the various intellectual and experiential crises confronting the religious person. Specific figures will be selected for study. Many of the examples will come from the Christian religion, but issues are selected so as to be applicable to several world religions. Areas examined include the interplay of religion and culture, religion and the intellectual life, the conflict of literary-historical criticism and biblical authority, religion and science, human suffering, gender, and the new political theology. The point of this course is not to agree with each of the theologians we study but by entering their scholarly discussions to develop an intellectual pattern for judging religious claims ourselves. Students are encouraged to become comfortable thinking about religion.

READINGS (tentative)

- H. Kushner. *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*
- Camus. *The Plague* (Modern Library Edition)
- J. Downey, ed. *Understanding Faith* (Reader from GU Bookstore)

GRADING AND PROCEDURES

The course revolves around the understanding and evaluation of a reading list and lectures. We will work together to understand the material. Assignments include study guides, short essays on quotes from the readings and group discussion days, three written exams (75%) and a final oral exam (25%). The final exam on Camus will give you a chance to show what you have learned about theological thinking during the term. Exams test on memorized facts, quotations from articles, understanding concepts, and making applications. The study guides and focus-reflection essays will provide a chance for students to do a brief exegesis of key issues as a preparation for class discussion. I also use these to give you some extra-credit points on your exams. Theology is a culture of questioning. You need to learn how to enter that culture with respect and intelligence.

I value our discussions and the writing you do to prepare for them highly. There is modest but continuous reading in this course. You have some small piece to read almost every week. You won't do well just reading it all a day before the exam. The course slowly builds understanding of the texts and readings. College level communications skills are presumed. Clarity and organization as well as understanding and insight are evaluated. Travel is an important part of our Gonzaga Florence Program and I consider it a unique educational tool. I will provide some extra-credit work based on various trips to places in Italy that link with my lecture topics. At times you will have to miss class because of travel. However, missing more than one class will lower your course grade.. If these requirements don't fit your personal learning style or your travel plans, you should think about not taking this course.

HINTS AND WISDOM

Students are responsible for their own understanding of the readings but are encouraged to work together. Study groups are an easy way to keep up with the course material. We will not be reading mere textbooks; our readings come from the writings of professional theologians. **Don't worry** if you don't grasp every part of a reading--you are not a professional theologian. **Do ask questions** and do focus on the point of the reading over the details. **Don't underestimate your own experience** and thoughts. While it is realistic to have a certain humility before thoughtful texts by famous authors, theological writers are at root attempting to connect with our common human experiences. Are they? Why or why not? As our course progresses, you will be more comfortable with their questions and will understand doing theology better than most of the people you know.

TOPICS

Introduction: Religious Studies and the Questions of Religion

- A. Thinking about Religion in the Contemporary World
 - a. Doing Theology: Why it isn't just ideology or fundamentalism
 - i. Faith, Belief, & Culture: Correlation and Cultural Shift
 - ii. *Fides et Ratio*: Models of Theological Method (patterns for questioning; usual attacks or not fleeing reason or tragedy)
 - iii. Terms, Relations, Materials: Respecting sources and Remembering Questions (P. Tillich, B. Lonergan, N. Lash, D.Tracy)
 - iv. Don't try this at home: Authority & Responsibility: Story, Neurosis, Group Bias & Method; rules of evidence for public academic conversation; Wittgenstein's rule, Second Naiveté
 - b. Answering to Contemporary Experience: Religion & the Intellectual
 - i. The Challenge of Academic Scripture Study: Culture and Incarnation (Example: R. Bultmann's Demythologizing Project)
 - ii. Religion & Science: Conflict, Juxtaposition, or Integration? (Example: Faith, Reason, and Galileo Affair; Museum of the History of Science)
 - iii. The Challenge of Human Suffering (Theodicy, H. Kushner; Metz)
- B. Dangerous Memories: Religion, Resistance, and Hope
 - a. God and Religion in a World Come of Age
 - i. Religious values and political values (Example: the Ghetto of Venice and Primo Levi)
 - ii. Gender, Class, and Race in the Conflict of Interpretations (Example: D. Soelle)
 - b. Political Theology and Cultural Amnesia: Johann Baptist Metz
 - c. A Practical Critique: Albert Camus

Instructor: Dr. John K. Downey is Professor of Religious Studies at Gonzaga University. He writes on issues in religion and culture and recently co-edited *Missing God: Cultural Amnesia and Political Theology*.