

Sample Syllabi – Subject to Change
RLST 10002 94 - Religion and Unbelief

Course Description

What does “spiritual but not religious” mean and in what ways does it overlap (or not) with commitments to religion and secularism? In this course, we unpack the categories of “religion,” “spirituality,” “atheism,” and “secularism” to better understand how they shape allegiances and dividing lines in contemporary social and political life. In the first half of the course, we will critically examine classical and contemporary approaches to these categories. In the second half, we will study three monographs that discuss these concepts and their entanglements, calling into question fundamental assumptions about the distinctiveness of the categories. As we work through course material, students will conduct their own ethnography of religion and unbelief in the Hyde Park area.

Course Format and Objectives

This course meets five days a week for three weeks from 9am to 3pm with a one-hour lunch break. Mornings will focus on class readings while afternoons are reserved for nontraditional learning modalities including film, field trips, and student-led ethnography. In the mornings I will introduce the day’s readings with a short lecture followed by student-led discussion. Each week, we will view and discuss one to two films related to class topics, visit one site in the Hyde Park area, and work on student ethnographic projects.

By the end of the course, students will be able to:

- Demonstrate familiarity with historical and recent trends in the categories of religion, secularism, spirituality, and atheism;
- Conduct small-scale ethnographic fieldwork on a class theme using multi-modal research methods;
- Analyze distinct perspectives on course themes to draw out geographical, epistemological, and temporal similarities and differences;
- Synthesize class materials and ethnographic research to articulate a thesis-driven argument.

Course Requirements

Breakdown of grade distribution:

Active participation in class discussions (30%)

Office hours (5%)

Learning reflections (5%)

Response Papers (30%)

Ethnographic research project (presentation + write-up) (30%)

1. Activate participation in class discussion (30%)

In this class we rely primarily on discussion to promote learning. Please come to class having carefully read assigned materials and prepared to discuss. One suggestion (optional) to assist in this process is to prepare three comments/questions you have about the materials in advance. While I encourage student-led free-flowing discussion, having comments prepared in advance works better for some students. Pay attention to your level of contribution compared to others. It is just as important to leave space for others to make their contributions. Listen to your peers’

class contributions and when possible, build off them in yours. You will receive a participation grade midway through the quarter and will have time to improve this as needed.

2. Office hours (5%)

A minimum of two office hours sessions is required throughout the session. Office hours allow me to learn about you and your interests to better tailor the course to those taking it. They also offer you a space to ask questions about the readings or course themes, discuss plans for upcoming writing assignments, review graded assignments, etc.

3. Learning reflection (5%)

One week into the session, you will fill out a directed self-evaluation form. The exercise consists of a short series of questions that invite you to reflect on your own thinking and learning in the course. This exercise is not given a quality grade (there are no “right” or “wrong” answers). You satisfy the requirement if you offer genuine reflections on the questions. Such exercises cognitively consolidate significant portions of what you have learned and allow you to articulate concrete goals for further growth. It also gives me a sense of how you are perceiving your work so far.

4. Critical Precis (30%)

Once a week you will compose a response paper critically examining key arguments from the texts we read that week. Through these papers you are asked to demonstrate understanding of key themes and arguments from the week’s readings, raising critical questions and pointing to areas of possible further exploration. The papers serve two main purposes: to synthesize your understanding of class materials and to help you develop analytical writing skills. Each response (~1000 words) should discuss at least two readings from the week. Papers are due by the start of class each Friday. Please submit in .doc or .docx format. PDFs will not be accepted.

5. Ethnographic Research Project (30%)

Throughout the term, you will progressively work on an ethnographic research project that culminates in an in-class presentation and paper. The project will involve small-scale fieldwork in Chicago, a literature review of the topic/phenomenon you choose to study, and time in class to discuss the direction of your project with your peers. There is an option to work in small groups (up to 3 people per group). Any requests to work in groups need to be discussed and approved in advance. Presentations will take place on the last day(s) of class. Final papers are due one week after the end of class and should be 1500-2000 words. This is an argument-driven paper and must have a clear thesis. Your thesis should appear in the first 2-3 paragraphs and be supported throughout with citations from multiple sources. Please submit in .doc or .docx format. PDFs will not be accepted.

Reading List:

Part I: Theoretical Approaches

Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, selections
Karl Marx, "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*," introduction Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism"
Stanley Tambiah, *Magic, Science, Religion, and the Scope of Rationality*, selections
J.Z. Smith, "Religion, Religions, Religious"
Talal Asad "The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category"
Clifford Geertz "Religion as a Cultural System"
Charles Taylor "Introduction" *In a Secular Age*
Jose Casanova "Secularization, Enlightenment and Modern Religion"
Elizabeth Drescher, *Choosing Our Religion*, selections
David Scott, "Chapter 1" *Conscripts of Modernity*
Winnifred Sullivan *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom*, selections
McGarry *Ghosts of Futures Past*, selections
Joan Scott, *Sex and Secularism*, selections
Jane Iwamura, *Virtual Orientalism*, selections
Glenn Greenwald, "Sam Harris, the New Atheists, and Anti-Muslim animus," [The Guardian](#)
Kathryn Lofton, "So You Want to Be a New Atheist" [Immanent Frame](#)
Vincent Lloyd, "Secularism's Two Ends" [Immanent Frame](#)
Jessica Grosse, "The Largest and Fastest Religious Shift in America is Well Underway"
[NYT](#) Mona Eltahawy, "Egypt's War on Atheism" [NYT](#)

Part II: Case Studies

Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Restless Souls*
Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*
Tanya Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back*