OVERVIEW

Is there such a thing as religion? If there is no universal agreement, how can we then have a philosophy of it? Departing from this predicament, this course will first examine how “religion” has been construed over time and in a variety of contexts. During the medieval period in the West, philosophy was considered “the handmaiden” to theology and understood to be of service to the deepening of one’s faith in God. Anselm of Canterbury’s celebrated ontological proof for God’s existence will be read as an example of this medieval marriage between philosophy and religion.

After touching upon the Western medieval endeavor to “prove” God’s existence, we’ll attend to the nineteenth century and Friedrich Nietzsche’s On the Genealogy of Morals. In this critique of religion, Nietzsche employs Hegel’s master/slave dialectic to identify the psychological state of ressentiment as a key factor in the birth of morality. Also, what many consider to be a modern classic, William James’s Varieties of Religious Experience (1902) will be read as another example of nineteenth century scholarship that sought to ground, psychologically, the nature and character of religious states of consciousness.

Next, we’ll turn to the mid-twentieth century when the comparative study of religions became more systematized in Western universities. Ranking prominently, Mircea Eliade developed the field of History of Religions by interpreting religious beliefs and practices through the lens of universal patterns and categories. Eliade’s method was later criticized for neglecting what is culturally unique. This raises important questions for us: Are there any universally shared structures that underpin all religious traditions, cross-culturally speaking? To what extent is “religious” meaning culturally and contextually determined?

To conclude the first part of this course, we’ll read Gianni Vattimo’s short work Belief and explore its postmodern themes. How is secularization made sacred? How is secularization and nihilism both heirs of Christianity? We’ll also read sections of Rene Girard’s The Scapegoat to complement our reading of Gianni Vattimo’s Belief.

In the second part of this course, we’ll engage in a close reading of two ancient authors whose writings had a profound influence on their respective religious traditions. Nagarjuna, the second century (CE) founder of the Madhyamaka school of Buddhism (one of two foundational schools of Mahayana Buddhist philosophy), had a profound influence on the
history of the Mahayana tradition in Tibet, China, Korea, and Japan (especially on the Ch’an/Zen tradition). In the West, the sixth century (CE) pseudonymous author Dionysius (hence, Pseudo-Dionysius) or St. Denys— as he was known in the middle ages—had a profound influence on the Jewish and Christian mystical traditions.

Interestingly, both Pseudo-Dionysius and Nagarjuna employed dialectical negation to expose the problem of talking about a sacred truth that exceeds the expressive capacity of language. This disparity between sign and signified—between language and sacred truth—will serve as a heuristic bridge for drawing into conversation the Buddhist and Abrahamic traditions. To what end does each author use language to undo the trappings of language? What are these trappings? How does “the sacred” differ for each author? Are stated notions of transcendence (mystico unio, epektasis, nirvana, sunyata) synonymous or radically different?

We’ll also explore questions of interpretation: How do we read history? What presuppositions do we (as citizens of the twenty-first century) bring to our reading of texts drawn from other cultures, traditions, and epochs?

Students will be expected to engage in close readings of the assigned texts as well as present their own written work in small group discussions. Please bring your readings to class.

**ASSESSMENTS**

- Regular attendance and participation in class discussions. More than three unexcused absences will result in a failing grade for the course. Please email permissions ahead of the absence. 20%

- “Insights and Blind Spots” 20%
Five single-page, single-spaced papers on a question or set of questions posed by me. As a critical component of this exercise, students meet and discuss their papers in small groups at dedicated class sessions. Late papers and electronic submissions will not be accepted.

- First Paper: 5-7 pages in length. Please refer to forthcoming guidelines. Due: Tuesday, October 25th (Please place in my Gallatin mailbox by 3 pm.) 30%

- Second Paper: 7-10 pages in length. Due: Wednesday, December 12th. 30%

**REQUIRED Texts**

- Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and Profane*
- Rene Girard, *The Scapegoat*
- William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*
- Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*
- Gianni Vattimo, *Belief*
- Shunyru Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind*

**IN-CLASS REQUIREMENTS**

Always bring your reading materials with you to class.
Laptops and all handheld electronic devices may not be used during class time.

Please take note of Gallatin’s policy on academic integrity:

_As a Gallatin student you belong to an interdisciplinary community of artists and scholars who value honest and open intellectual inquiry. This relationship depends on mutual respect, responsibility, and integrity. Failure to uphold these values will be subject to severe sanction, which may include dismissal from the University. Examples of behaviors that compromise the academic integrity of the Gallatin School include plagiarism, illicit collaboration, doubling or recycling coursework, and cheating. Please consult the Gallatin Bulletin or Gallatin website [www.gallatin.nyu.edu/academics/policies/policy/integrity.html] for a full description of the academic integrity policy._

COURSE SCHEDULE
Note: Readings marked with a bullet (•) will be posted to blackboard.

PART ONE: What is Religion? A Smattering of Theories

**Week 1 (9/4)**
Course Overview
Introduction: Is there such a thing as religion?
Read:
• Anselm of Canterbury, *Proslogion*, Preface and Chapters 1 – 4 (pp. 82-89)

**Week 2 (9/11)**
Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*
Read:
Preface and “First Essay: ‘Good and Evil,’ ‘Good and Bad’”

**Week 3 (9/18)**
Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*
Read:

**Week 4 (9/25)**
William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*
Read:
James, Lectures II-V
“Circumscription of the Topic”
“The Reality of the Unseen”
“The Religion of Healthy-Mindedness”
Week 5 (10/4)  William James, *Varieties*

Read:
James, Lectures VI-VIII, XVI-XVII, XX
“The Sick Soul”
“The Divided Self, and the Process of Unification”
“Mysticism”
“Conclusions” and “Postscript”

Recommended:
• W.T. Stace, “What is Mysticism?”
• Steven T. Katz, “Language, Epistemology and Mysticism” (pt. 1 & 2)

Week 6 (10/9)  Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*

Read:
Eliade, Introduction and Chapters I & II
• Jonathan Z. Smith, “The Wobbling Pivot”
• Jonathan Z. Smith, “In Search of Place”

Week 7 (10/16)  NO CLASS, UNIVERSITY HOLIDAY

Please read Gianni Vattimo, *Belief*

Recommended:
Eliade, Chapters III & IV

Week 8 (10/23)  Gianni Vattimo, *Belief*

Read:
Gianni Vattimo, *Belief*, entire

Wednesday, October 24th  FIRST PAPER DUE (please place in my Gallatin mailbox by 3 pm sharp!)

Week 9 (10/30)  Rene Girard, *The Scapegoat*

Read:
*The Scapegoat*, pp. 1-56, 95-124, 165-183, 198-212

Recommended:
*The Scapegoat*, pp. 184-197
PART TWO: A Cross-Cultural Conversation on Religious Language and its Limits

Week 10 (11/6) Ps-Dionysius and his Language of Unsaying
Read:
• Ps-Dionysius, *The Mystical Theology*
• Paul Rorem, “The Uplifting Spirituality of Pseudo-Dionysius”
• Michael Sells, “Unsaying”

Week 11 (11/13) Pseudo-Dionysius and his “Uplifting” Method
Read:
• Ps-Dionysius, *The Celestial Hierarchy,* Ch. 2
• Ps-Dionysius, *The Divine Names,* Ch. 4

Week 12 (11/20) The Buddha and his Four Noble Truths (*aryasatya*)
Read:
• John Strong, “The Life Story of the Buddha and Its Ramifications”
• *The Heart Sutra* of Mahayana Buddhism
  “Emptiness is form, form is emptiness.”
• John Koller, “The Way of the Buddha”

Week 13 (11/27) Nagarjuna and *Sunyata* (Emptiness)
Read:
• Nagarjuna, *Mulamadhyamakakarikas* (*Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way,* Chaps. 24-26)

No Class, Thursday, Nov. 25th THANKSGIVING RECESS

Week 14 (12/4) A Buddhist Parable of the Self
In-Class Screening:
*Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter...Spring*
A film by Kim Ki-duk
Read:
• Nagarjuna, *Mulamadhyamakakarika,* Chap 18
  “Examination of Self and Entities”
Week 15 (12/11)  
Zen and the Language of “Big Mind”

Read:
Shunyru Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind*, entire
• Henry Rosemont, “The Meaning is the Use: Koan and Mondo as Linguistic Tools of the Zen Masters”

Last Day of Class: Tuesday, December 11th

Wednesday, December 12th  
SECOND PAPER DUE  (Please place in my Gallatin mailbox no later than 3 pm.)