RLST 391.01: Religion and Violence in the Bible and the Ancient World

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RLST 391: Religion and Violence in the Bible and the Ancient World

Spring Semester 2014
Tues 2:10 – 5:00 pm  GBB 205  3 credits

"Violence is the heart and secret soul of the sacred."
- René Girard

Course Description:
This course investigates modern, multidisciplinary perspectives on a series of topics that lie at the nexus between religion and violence in biblical antiquity. Topics for discussion include: prehistoric violence and Neolithic religion; conflict myths; the divine warrior; holy war; iconoclasm; sacrifice; curses and magic spells; witchcraft accusations; sectarianism; apocalypticism; martyrdom.

Required Textbooks:
The following books are available for purchase in the UM Bookstore:
3. All other assigned readings noted in the syllabus will be available on electronic reserve on the Mansfield Library Website (http://eres.lib.umt.edu/eres/). Because these readings will be the basis of our discussion, please print these them out and bring them to class with you.

The e-reserve password for this course is: RLST391


Course Requirements:
1. *Attendance and participation*: Regular attendance is required for this course. Preparation for and participation in class meetings is expected and essential.
2. *Readings*: Plan to complete all readings before the class session for which they are assigned. Take notes on the readings to facilitate your discussion in class, and bring the assigned readings with you to class. Students must type out one discussion question on each assigned reading for every class.
3. *Class presentations*: Students will have several opportunities to present assigned materials and their own research in class.
4. *Research paper*, on a topic chosen in consultation with the instructor: 10-15 pages (typed, double-spaced, 12-point font). A preliminary research topic statement (1 page, typed) is due by week 7. An outline of the research paper (typed) is due by week 11. Student research presentations will be given in weeks 14 and 15. The research paper itself is due Friday May 9.
Grading:

1) Regular attendance, preparation, and participation in seminar: 20%
2) Preparation of typed discussion questions on class readings: 15%
3) Presentations of class materials: 10%
4) Presentation of research topic: 15%
5) Research paper: 40%

Course Policies:

1) There will be no make-up exams or extensions unless the student has made arrangements at least a week ahead of time. Except in the case of a documented emergency, late assignments will result in a decrease of one letter grade per day.

2) Attendance: This course meets once a week for a total of 14 class sessions. Students are allowed one cut; each additional absence will result in a decrease of 15% of the attendance and participation grade (that is, 3% of the final grade). But more than three cuts will result in failure for the course. It is the student’s responsibility to obtain from a classmate any class notes and other assignment and scheduling information discussed during an absence.

3) This is a course about religion as an academic subject and the development of the Bible in historical context. This is not a class that teaches religion or religious doctrine from a religious and/or devotional perspective. In this class, we will be examining biblical literature in an academic and secular setting, and treating the biblical text as an ancient document open to questioning, examination, criticism, and interpretation. An interest in exploring new ideas and new methods of examining the biblical text are essential. This class is not a forum for expressions of personal theology.

4) Students may not use any electronic communication devices in the classroom. Tablets and laptops may be used only for note taking, only if necessary, and must remain offline. Students using cell phones, smartphones, or computers to text or go online during class will be asked to leave the classroom.

5) Plagiarism – the presentation of others’ work as your own – is an offense punishable by course failure and/or expulsion. All work submitted in this class must be your own, and all references to ideas from books, articles, or other sources must be cited correctly. If you do not know how to properly reference your work, or you are in doubt whether or not you should cite material, refer to the University guidelines, or make an appointment to see the instructor to discuss the problem. Anyone found guilty of plagiarism, cheating, forgery, falsification or any other form of academic dishonesty will fail this course and the incident will be reported to the Dean.

6) Disability accommodations: Students with disabilities may develop a course accommodation plan with the assistance of Disability Services. The instructor will assist in facilitating all disability accommodations.
COURSE SCHEDULE

Note: Our schedule may change as our course develops. Regular attendance will ensure that you are informed of any changes.

Week 1 (Jan. 28): Introduction to the course
There are no prerequisites for this course, but students without prior background in the academic study of the Bible in the university will find it very helpful to read Richard E. Friedman, *Who Wrote the Bible?* during the first weeks of the semester.

Week 2 (Feb. 4): Thinking about Religion and Violence
**Readings:**

Week 3 (Feb. 11): Religion and Violence in Prehistory and Earliest History
**Readings:**
The HarperCollins Study Bible, pp. xli – xlii, xliiv – lvi (the lists of books and abbreviations, the timeline, and especially the short essay sections (“Critical Reading,” “Israelite Religion,” “Greco-Roman Context”) here will provide brief introductions to biblical literature, its ancient contexts, and its modern study. Students are encouraged to also read Friedman, *Who Wrote the Bible?*.

Genesis 4:1-16

*The Stele of the Vultures*

Week 4 (Feb. 18): Conflict Myths: Creation and the Divine Warrior
**Readings:**
*Enuma Elish* (Babylonian creation account)
*Baal* (Canaanite myths from Ugarit)
Genesis 1:1-2:4; Psalms 104:3-9; 74:12-19; 89:9-10; Isaiah 27:1; 51:9-10; Job 38:1-11; 40:15-41:34


Weeks 5 – 6 (Feb. 25, Mar. 4): Holy War

Readings:


The Mesha Inscription

Assyrian Royal Monumental Victory Inscriptions


Week 7 (Mar. 11): Iconoclasm

Readings:

Biblical texts:

Law: Exodus 20:4; 20: 23; 34:17; Leviticus 19:4; 26:1; Deuteronomy 4:15-28; 5:8; 12:1-5; 27:15
Narrative: Genesis 35:1-4; Exodus 32; 1 Samuel 4-6; 2 Samuel 6; 1 Kings 12: 25-32; 2 Kings 19:15-19;

Apocrypha: Bel and the Dragon; Letter of Jeremiah


Weeks 8 – 9 (Mar. 18, Mar. 25): Sacrifice

Readings:


Homer, Odyssey, Book 3, lines 451-520.

The following readings and page numbers are excerpted from Princeton Readings in Religion and Violence (eds. Mark Juergensmeyer and Margo Kitts, Princeton 2011):


Week 10 (Apr. 1): Spring Break

Week 11 (Apr. 8): Curses, “Magic,” and Witchcraft Accusations

Readings:


Mesopotamian, Egyptian, and Greco-Roman curses and magic spells:


Week 12 (Apr. 15): Apocalypticism and Sectarianism

Readings:
Hebrew Bible: Daniel 2, 7-12;
Dead Sea Scrolls: Damascus Document, Habakkuk Interpretation, War Scroll (selections);
Galatians 1:6-2:21; 1 Thessalonians 1:10; 4:13-5:11; 1 Corinthians 15; Revelation


Week 13 (Apr. 22): Martyrdom

Readings:
Letter of Ignatius to the Romans; Martyrdom of Polycarp; Martyrdom of Perpetua & Felicitas

Weeks 14 – 15 (Apr. 29, May 6): Student Presentations