Course title: World Religions and the Media  
Course code: RELI 2001 PRAG  
Programs offering course: Central European Studies, Communication, New Media, and Journalism  
Language of instruction: English  
U.S. semester credits: 3.00  
Contact hours: 45.00  
Term: Spring 2021  

Course Description

Religious belief represents a significant facet in the complexity of today’s world. Communications and media experts in particular need to understand the philosophical, historical, sociological, communicative and doctrinal aspects of major religious traditions in order to provide balanced and unbiased reports. This course analyzes religions in the context of their historical development and their symbiotic relationship with local cultures, examining cross-tradition similarities and the uniqueness of each of the religions. Special emphasis is placed on the attitudes of the various religious traditions toward politics and violence, and on the role of communications in this process. As part of this course, students also focus on the particularities of religious and non-religious worldviews in Central Europe and in a larger European context.

Learning Objectives

By completing this course, students will:

- Critically compare competing religious claims;
- Distinguish between facts and fiction in media coverage of religion;
- Distinguish between the doctrinal, cultural and political aspects of religion, and produce better informed analytical media stories;
- Acquire expertise in Central European views on religion and its practices, and represent these views to the Western public in a more nuanced and contextualized way;
- Understand sensitivities of other religious and non-religious worldviews and examine how media professionals can interact with them in a constructive and solution-oriented manner.

Course Prerequisites

None.

Methods of Instruction

Lectures, home assignments with follow-up discussions, reaction papers. PowerPoint presentations from lectures will be available on CIEE Prague Center Canvas website. They are designed to serve as visual reminder of the main concepts of the course and as a short textbook for this course. Specific pages from three core textbooks (see bibliography) will be used as necessary. The course also will include demonstration of video materials. After watching them the students will be asked to answer quizzes or write short reaction papers (or PPT presentations). Volunteering for individual research assignments and short reports/reaction papers is encouraged and will earn extra credit points for the final grade. This may take the form of a travel report on a topic previously agreed with instructor or other form of individual research. All mandatory reaction papers may increase or decrease (in case of late submission or non-submission) credit points, whilst optional reaction papers/presentations will increase the score. Regular on-line discussions will be an integral part of the learning process.

Assessment and Final Grade

1. Homework / Reaction Papers 15%  
2. PPT Presentations 10%  
3. Quizzes 5%  
4. Midterm Exam 10%


5. Final Exam - Presentation 20%
6. Final Exam - Essay 20%
7. Participation / Discussion 20%
TOTAL 100%

Course Requirements

Homework / Reaction Papers

Homework refers short written notes in preparation for the class discussions and home reading assignments. Students are expected to base their written work on the course material and on home reading, as directed by instructor, and on their individual research. Home assignments are to be delivered on time/deadline. Exceptions, for justifiable reasons, must be discussed with instructor beforehand and in timely manner and/or obtain permission from the Academic Administration.

Reaction papers refer to short reaction papers after a screening of video material; and to the substance and quality of the content of on-line discussion contributions (comments).

More detailed instructions for each home assignment will be published on the CIEE Canvas site in the Announcements section.

PPT Presentations

Individual presentations will be a PPT presentation (up 3 – 5 min.) For regular course presentations the students will have to provide instructor with approx. one page-long list of talking points (printed version before the presentation and file uploaded on Canvas after the presentation). PPT presentation file has to be uploaded on Canvas on the day of presentation the latest. Both presentation and talking points files have to have the name of the author and title of the topic in the file name. Presentation will be graded by five criteria: 1. Logic and organization of the content, 2. oral presentation/clarity, 3. Visuals, 4. Research, 5. Q/A (answering questions requires more background research than presented in the slides).

Quizzes

Quizzes refer to in-class quizzes. They will have two formats: electronic and hard copy. The electronic quizzes will be announced by instructor in advance to allow students to bring their laptops. The questions will be displayed on the projection screen for limited time each, and the students will write their answers in either a document (and upload it on Canvas) or fill out/mark rubrics on Canvas template for this specific quiz. They will be graded on a basis of percentage of correct answers. The hard copy paper quizzes will not be announced in advance and will have to be filled out by hand within a specific time limit for the whole quiz. They may or may not be graded. This type of quizzes is designed to help students assess their learning progress. Students will be involved in assessing and discussing each other's results.

Midterm Exam

Students are expected to deliver a well-organized and articulated oral presentation with visuals (max 3 min.; PPT or equivalent, short videos are acceptable as additional illustration) presentation, based on their original research. They also have to submit electronically the file with their presentation (after the exam) no later than the day of presentation. Presentation will be graded by five criteria:

1. Logic and organization of the content,
2. oral presentation/clarity,
3. Visuals,
4. Research,
5. Q/A (answering questions requires more background research than presented in the slides).

The total exam grade will be the media of the grades for all criteria.

Final Exam - Presentation

Final Exam - Essay

Consists of two components:

- Students are expected to deliver a well-organized and articulated oral presentation with visuals (max 5 min.; PPT or equivalent, short videos are acceptable as additional illustration) presentation, based on their original research. They also have to submit electronically the file with their presentation (after the exam) no later than by the end of semester. Presentation will be graded by five criteria:
They will have to write their take-home answers (in a form of a short essay) to a prompting statement provided by instructor or write an essay/academic paper based on the research done for the Final presentation. In this case this will be as writing a minor thesis and presenting/defending it orally. The essay/paper must have proper academic formatting with heading, introduction, main argument, conclusion, thorough referencing and source list. The length of the essay/paper is between 1,500 and 1,600 words.

Participation / Discussion

Participation grade will consist of two components. Class participation will be graded on the basis of frequency and substance (note: the quality of the content will also contribute to the Homework grade) of individual student contributions to class discussion and other activities (volunteering for leading roles in group work). This can contribute up to 50% to the total of grade in this category. Participation (timeliness and frequency of posts) in on-line discussion forum may constitute up to 50%. Participation in on-line discussions allows students to apply their theoretical knowledge and analytical skills to current social and political events. Therefore it is an important factor in grading the overall activity (note: the quality of the content will also contribute to the Homework grade). Without on-line contributions, even the most active class participation alone will not bring the total score in this category above 85 percentage points.

CIEE Prague Class Participation Policy

Assessment of students’ participation in class is an inherent component of the course grade. Participation is valued as meaningful contribution in the digital and tangible classroom, utilizing the resources and materials presented to students as part of the course. Students are required to actively, meaningfully and thoughtfully contribute to class discussions and all types of in-class activities throughout the duration of the class. Meaningful contribution requires students to be prepared, as directed, in advance of each class session. This includes valued or informed engagement in, for example, small group discussions, online discussion boards, peer-to-peer feedback (after presentations), interaction with guest speakers, and attentiveness on co-curricular and outside-of-classroom activities.

Students are responsible for following the course content and are expected to ask clarification questions if they cannot follow the instructor's or other students’ line of thought or argumentation.

The use of electronic devices is only allowed for computer-based in-class tests, assignments and other tasks specifically assigned by the course instructor. Students are expected to take notes by hand unless the student is entitled to the use of computer due to his/her academic accommodations. In such cases the student is required to submit an official letter issued by his/her home institution specifying the extent of academic accommodations.

Class participation also includes students’ active participation in Canvas discussions and other additional tasks related to the course content as specified by the instructor.

Students will receive a partial participation grade every three weeks.

Attendance

Regular class attendance is required throughout the program.

If you will miss a class for any reason, notify the Program Coordinator and your instructor beforehand via Canvas. You are responsible for any materials covered in class during your absence, and except in the specific cases listed below, credit will not be granted for missed assessments.

Excessive absences will result in a notification letter, and finally a warning letter, sent to you and your home school, based on the following:
The notification letters are intended to ensure that you are well advised in advance of any potential for failure or dismissal, so that you can take steps to avoid this.

As the table shows, **missing more than 20% of any class (e.g., due to undocumented illness, travel delays, flight cancellations, over-sleeping, etc.) results in automatic failure of the course.**

If you miss an assessment in class due to an absence, you will be able to make it up in the following instances:

- You provide a relevant doctor's note from a local medical professional to your Program Coordinator within 24 hours of your absence (a scan or photograph sent via e-mail are acceptable)
- A CIEE staff member verifies that you were too ill to attend class.
- You provide evidence of a family emergency to your Program Coordinator.
- You have an approved absence related to the observance of a religious holiday from the Academic Director based on a request submitted before you arrived onsite.

**Please note:** Absences incurred due to documented illness, documented family emergency or the observance of a religious holiday approved before arrival onsite do not count towards the total of absences. Students may self-certify one absence due to illness without providing a doctor’s note as long as they notify the Program Coordinator within 24 hours of their absence by e-mail or a text message.

**Other attendance-related policies**

If you transfer from one CIEE class to another during the Add/Drop period, you will not be considered absent from the first session(s) of the new class provided you were marked present for the first session(s) of the original class.

If you are over 15 minutes late for a class, the instructor is required to mark you absent.

In case of class conflicts (irregularities in the class schedule, including field trips and make-up classes), always contact the Academic Department to decide the appropriate course of action.

Please remember to track your attendance on the Canvas Course Sites and report any errors in the record to the Academic Department within one week of the discrepancy date, as later claims may not be considered.

These attendance rules also apply to any required co-curricular excursion, activity, or event, and to for-credit internships.

CIEE staff does not manage absences at partner institutions providing direct enrollment classes (FAMU, ECES and FSV), but they have similar attendance policies and attendance is monitored there. Grade penalties may result from excessive absences.

**N.B. Course schedule is subject to change due to study tours, excursions, or local holidays. Final schedules will be included in the final syllabus provided to students on site.**

**Weekly Schedule**

**Week 1**

**Class: 1.1 INTRODUCTION TO THE COURSE:**

The field of religious studies and its development; religion as seen from philosophical, sociological, psychological, theological, historical and political perspectives; the communicative function of religion; stereotypes in the media; variety of views on religion in Central Europe.

**Readings:** PPT Intro; Intro from The Religions Book (as directed by instructor).

**Class: 1.2 VARIETY OF WORLDVIEWS AND THE WAYS OF INTERPRETING THE WORLD AND RELIGION**
Materialist and idealist approaches to the world: what is mind and what is matter? What is the primal source of everything. Chronos and Kairos. Do we know everything about the Universe and our place in it? What is the meaning of organic life and us living on one of the billions of planets? Anomalies and controversies in various theories. Is religion and science incompatible? Rational thinking and other life experiences.

Readings: Intro from the Religions Book (as directed by instructor); Files from the electronic Canvas reader (Burkhardt); handouts and/or on-line discussion topics.

Week 2
Class: 2.1 PRIMAL & PREHISTORICAL BELIEFS:

The great existential questions of all times; surviving primal religious traditions today.

Readings: Intro from The Religions Book (specific pages as directed by instructor); web links from the PPT Primal Religions; handout "Hopi Message to the UN".

Class: 2.2 ANCIENT AND CLASSICAL BELIEFS:

Polytheism and the hierarchy of gods; afterlife, rituals, virtue; ancient mythological themes in modern entertainment media; achievements of Czech Egyptology and studies of ancient cultures.

Readings: The Religions Book (specific pages as directed by instructor); web links from the PPT Ancient and Classical Beliefs.

Week 3
Class: 3.1 HINDUISM:

The order of the Universe, the cycles of human existence, the female aspect of divine, humans relate to the divine by practice, many paths to the ultimate truth, world is an illusion, non-violence in the political realm. The problem of superficiality in media coverage; Hinduism in Europe; Czech fascination with Hindu traditions. (Quiz)

Readings: The Religions Book (Hinduism: specific pages as directed by instructor); PPT Hinduism and web links from the PPT; Anthology of Living Religions; (Creation Story and other specific pages as directed by instructor).

Class: 3.2 HINDUISM (CONTINUED):


Readings: PPT Hinduism; Files from the electronic Canvas reader (Hymns of Rigveda; Lessons of Upanishads; The Religion and Philosophy of Rigveda and Upanishads; Sayings of Ramakrishna, as directed by instructor ); handouts and/or on-line discussion topics.

Week 4
Class: 4.1 BUDDHISM:

The origin of Buddhism, the path to truth and escape from the eternal cycle of suffering, kindness and compassion, enlightenment and the importance of continuous practice; scientists and media about Buddhism; Buddhism in Czech Republic and Central Europe.

Readings: The Religions Book (Buddhism: specific pages as directed by instructor); PPT Buddhism; Anthology of Living Religions; (specific pages on Buddhism, as directed by instructor); The Tibetan Book of Dead (specific pages as individual assignments); handouts and/or on-line discussion topics.

Class: 4.2 JUDAISM:

God's covenant and monotheism, the Law, the Messiah, all humans have a divine spark in them; Jewish tradition in Central Europe.

Readings: The Religions Book (Judaism: specific pages as directed by instructor); PPT Judaism and web links provided in it; Anthology of Living Religions; (specific pages as directed by instructor);
**Week 5**

Class: 5.1  **JUDAISM (CONTINUED):**

Wider cultural and philosophical influence of Judaism; political Zionism, Holocaust, modern approaches in Judaism; History of Jewish persecutions in Europe; the specter of the past: the rise of new anti-Semitism in Central and Western Europe; media coverage of this phenomenon. *(Quiz)*

**Readings:** The Religions Book (Judaism: specific pages as directed by instructor); web links from the PPT Judaism); Files from the electronic Canvas reader (Smith, Judaism); handouts and/or on-line discussion topics.

Class: 5.2  **CHRISTIANITY:**

Jesus as Alfa and Omega, death on the cross as message to the world, body and soul interpretations, the divine trinity, serving others by transforming the world – not conforming to it. Religious dissenting movements in the Czech history and their representation in popular culture.

**Readings:** The Religions Book (Christianity: specific pages as directed by instructor); PPT Christianity; Anthology of Living Religions; (Christianity: specific pages as directed by instructor); handouts and/or on-line discussion topics.

**Week 6**

Class: 6.1  **CHRISTIANITY (CONTINUED):**

Varieties of Christian interpretation; “no salvation outside the Church,” hierarchical and non-hierarchical approaches, the function of prayer. The relationship of religion and State in Czech history; current media attitudes toward religious issues.

**Readings:** The Religions Book (Christianity: specific pages as directed by instructor); PPT Christianity; Files from the electronic Canvas reader (Smith, Christianity); handouts and/or on-line discussion topics.

Class: 6.2  **MIDTERM EXAM**

In-class PPT presentations with talking points outline.

**Week 7**

Class: 7.1  **ISLAM:**

- Review of the Midterm results.
- Intro to the story of Islam.
- Sacred texts, people, concepts, practices.
- Relationship with other religious traditions.
- Islamic revivalism.

**Readings:** The Religions Book (specific pages as directed by instructor); PPT Islam; Anthology of Living Religions; (Islam: specific pages as directed by instructor); handouts and/or on-line discussion topics.

Class: 7.2  **ISLAM (CONTINUED):**

Modern approaches in Islam; Islam and politics; variety of modern interpretations of Jihad; common Central European beliefs about Islam; the battle of stereotypes and facts in liberal and conservative media. *(Quiz)*

**Readings:** PPT Islam; Files from the electronic Canvas reader (Smith, Islam); handouts and/or on-line discussion topics

**Week 8**

Class: 8.1  **REVIEWING THE GREAT LIVING RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS:**

- Commonalities and differences
Sacred texts, people, space, time.

Contribution to the human knowledge and creativity.

Problematic areas within each tradition.

Readings: PPTs Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity; Files from the electronic Canvas reader (Smith: Judaism, Christianity, Islam; Hick: Religious Pluralism, as directed by instructor); handouts and/or on-line discussion topics.

Class: 8.2 MODERN RELIGIONS:

Sikhism, Santeria, following Jesus, Baha’i, Tenrikyo, “tribulation,” The Lion of Juda, Scientology, Unification Church, Wicca, Hare Krishna, Falun Dafa, meditative and all-beliefs-accepting movements. Limitations of media information about closed movements; charismatic bias; Central and East European neo-pagan movements seen as revival of the remnants of pre-Christian traditions.

Readings: The Religions Book (Modern Religions: specific pages as directed by instructor); PPT Modern Religions; Anthology of Living Religions; (Modern Religions: specific pages as directed by instructor); handouts and/or on-line discussion topics.

Week 9
Class: 9.1 MODERN RELIGIONS (CONTINUED):

Discussing new religious movements; examples of NRM media coverage in the West and in Czech Republic; short student presentations. Difference between new or revivalist religious movement and totalitarian and/or violent sects.

Readings: The Religions Book (Modern Religions: specific pages assigned individually as directed by instructor); web links from the PPT 8; Anthology of Living Religions; (Modern Religions: specific pages as directed by instructor).

Class: 9.2 FACING THE PLURALITY OF BELIEFS:

Secularism, agnosticism, atheism, variety of religious traditions and internet; science and religion. Foundations of atheistic beliefs in the Czech Republic; media discourse and ways of avoiding emotional clashes of worldviews

Readings: PPT Plurality of Beliefs; Files from the electronic Canvas reader (Dawkins, Einstein, Ueshiba, Sun Tzu, pages as directed by instructor); handouts and/or on-line discussion topics.

Week 10
Class: 10.1 RELIGION AND MEDIA

Media coverage of religion: over-generalized coverage of religion by certain media outlets; the role of social media networks in the formation of negative stereotypes; Czech media coverage of religion in general as compared to coverage of religiously termed violent political groups, overgeneralization and prejudice reflected in media; strategies and tactics for keeping the media discourse civil.

Readings: PPT Media Coverage; Files from the electronic Canvas reader (latest issues [links] as directed by instructor); handouts and/or on-line discussion topics.

Class: 10.2 RELIGION AND MEDIA (CONTINUED):

Religion and Violence: Modern communicative aspects of religion: religion, media, social networks, politics and violence; aspects of classical propaganda theory that apply to some religiously termed violent political movements.

GROUP DISCUSSION OF THE MAIN CONCEPTS OF THE COURSE. (FIRST STUDENT PRESENTATIONS/FINAL MAKE-UP OPPORTUNITY).

Readings: PPT Religion and Violence; Files from the electronic Canvas reader (latest issues [links] as directed by instructor); handouts and/or on-line discussion topics. Review of the main concepts of the all previous readings.
Week 11
Class: 11.1 STUDENT PRESENTATIONS

Readings: n/a

Week 12
Class: 12.1 STUDENT PRESENTATIONS/FINAL DISCUSSION (GROUP EXERCISE)

Potential final discussion topics: Diversity of secular and religious worldviews, media, politics and violence. Process of cultural hybridization and various reactions to it. Breaking the vicious cycle.

Readings: all previous course material and individual research findings.

Class: 12.2 REVISION OF THE COURSE

Revision of the course.

Readings: PPT Revision; Files from the electronic Canvas reader (latest issues [links] as directed by instructor); Review of all essential course readings as directed by instructor.

Week 13
Class: 13.1 STUDENT PRESENTATIONS

Student presentations. Tutoring, as needed.

Readings: n/a

Class: 13.2 FINAL EXAM

Take-home exam: essay/paper

Readings: n/a

Course Materials
Readings

Core textbooks:


Recommended:


Additional readings may be distributed and/or assigned, including excerpts from book chapters, op-ed pages, and scholarly journals. The list may be updated in regard to the specific interest areas of the students.

Online Resources

Links for discussion updates: current topics several times a week. Links with prompting questions will be provided
by instructor as they appear in the media or as relevant to the class topics. Generic links will be in the appropriate section of Modules on Canvas. Follow the Announcements on Canvas course site.

**Media Resources**

**Films**

Excerpts from numerous documentaries and motion pictures representing various aspects of religious traditions and historical events will be screened in class.