CIEE Prague, Czech Republic

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 2022

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

- 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**

To encourage engaged learning, regular class attendance is required throughout the program. This includes any required co-curricular class excursion or event, as well as internship, service-learning, or other required field placement.

An excused absence in a CIEE course will only be considered if approved by a CIEE Center Director/Academic Director (not the Instructor), and:

- it is a self-certified absence for illness (only once per course, requires formal request before or within 24 hours, cannot miss assessment worth more than 5% of final course grade)
- a doctor’s note from a local medical professional is provided
- evidence of a family emergency is provided
- it is a pre-approved observance of religious holiday

Unexcused absences include personal travel and/or travel delays, as well as missing more than 25% of a single class period (including tardiness and early departure). Assessments missed due to unexcused absences will be marked as zero. Students with over 10% unexcused absences will be contacted by CIEE staff. Students with over
20% unexcused absences will be contacted by CIEE staff, receive a formal warning letter (shared with their home institution) and lose 10% of the final course point total (e.g., a final A grade of 93% will be lowered to a B grade of 83%).

For more detail, please consult your CIEE Academic Manual.

**Academic Integrity**

Academic integrity is essential to a positive and inclusive teaching and learning environment. All students are expected to complete coursework responsibilities with fairness, respect, and honesty. Failure to do so by seeking unfair advantage over others or misrepresenting someone else’s work as your own can result in grade penalties or disciplinary action. See the CIEE Student Academic Manual for further information on academic integrity.

**N.B. Course schedule and co-curriculars are subject to change. The final duration and distribution of content and assignments will be determined and presented to students at the onset of the course.**

**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
Class:   3.2  HINDUISM (CONTINUED):

Varieties of Hindu traditions. Multitude of deities and their coexistence. Devotional and

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);
handouts and/or on-line discussion topics.

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.
**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.

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**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.

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**Week 11**

**Class: 11.1 STUDENT PRESENTATIONS**

**Readings:** n/a

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**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.

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**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.