

Bergen Community College
Division of Humanities
Department of Philosophy and Religion

Course Syllabus

PHR-120: Introduction to Religion

An individual classroom syllabus for this course must include as much of the following information as is applicable:

Basic Information About Course and Instructor:

Semester and year:

Section Number:

Meeting Times:

Locations:

Instructor:

Office Location:

Phone:

Departmental Secretary: [optional]

Office Hours:

Email Address:

Course Description:

PHR-120 Introduction to Religion is a study of major themes in religious and theological thought. Topics of discussion include the nature and existence of God; the relationship between God, humanity, and the universe; human nature and the human condition; religious responses to the problems of human existence; and the relationship between religion and society. 3 credits General Education Course – Humanities Elective

Student Learning Outcomes: As a result of meeting the requirements in this course, students will be able to:

1. analyze and articulate what makes something "religious" by exploring key elements such as rituals, myths, ethics, and sacred spaces within diverse cultural and historical contexts.
2. evaluate how religion is expressed through individual and communal identities, sacred texts, rituals, and conceptions of the divine across various traditions.
3. describe and assess the influence of religion on media, politics, and popular culture, and how it shapes contemporary social dynamics and ethical debates.
4. explore and think critically about complex religious ideas such as the nature of the divine, the problem of evil, and the meaning of religious experience.

5. compare and contrast religious practices, beliefs, and symbols across different cultures and traditions to better understand their diversity and shared elements.
6. locate, evaluate, and use effectively information from a variety of relevant sources appropriate for the academic study of religion; and
7. engage in respectful conversations about religious beliefs and practices and communicate informed perspectives on religious diversity.

In pursuit of the foregoing objectives, the course is based on the reading and discussion of both primary and secondary sources; the essential principles of critical thinking are introduced; techniques of scholarly research and writing are reviewed; students are encouraged to participate actively in class discussions; and students are required to do a substantial amount of expository and critical writing in response to the material presented in the course.

Relationship between these Student Learning Outcomes and the Gen Ed/Essential Learning Outcomes:

SLOs:	EL1	EL2	EL3	EL4	EL5	EL6	EL7	EL8	EL9	EL10	EL11
1		X						X	X	X	X
2		X					X		X	X	
3		X							X		X
4		X					X		X		
5		X				X			X	X	
6		X				X					
7	X									X	

EL1-Effective Speaking
 EL2-Effective Writing
 EL3-Mathematical Reasoning
 EL4-Scientific Reasoning
 EL5-Technological Competency
 EL6-Information Literacy

EL7-Social-Behavioral Analysis
 EL8-Historical Analysis
 EL9-Humanistic Analysis
 EL10-Intercultural Awareness
 EL11-Moral Literacy

Course Signature Assignments:

Analysis: What makes something religious?

In this assignment, you will explore how one focus of our study this semester—e.g., a type of ritual, a type of social movement, a type of symbol, or a type of “religious experience”—manifests in two different cultural contexts, and how the often unclear boundaries between “religious” and “secular” practices may influence our thinking about each. To start, choose a practice or phenomenon that we’ve studied that can be debated as “religious” or “non-religious.” Possible subjects include contemporary spiritual practices (e.g., mindfulness meditation, or

meditation in secular spaces, or “manifesting”), some aspect of “civil religion,” political movements with religious elements or religious influences, or cultural rituals/festivals (including holidays) with religious origins.

Write a 4-5 page essay, using at least 3 scholarly sources, addressing all of the following:

- Describe the key features of the phenomenon, and discuss the role it plays in individual and community identity.
- Analyze reasons for thinking this phenomenon should be classified as religious, or secular, or perhaps a blend of both, while comparing how this phenomenon is viewed in at least two different cultural or religious contexts. (Could be different religious communities, views of different secular or religious critics, different perspectives in popular media, etc.)
- Evaluate how different understandings of religion shape individual and societal attitudes toward this, and how cultural background influences one’s understanding of what is considered “religious.”
- End with a meta-cognitive reflection: What did this exercise reveal to you about the nature of religion? What surprised you? Did it challenge or reinforce the traditional definitions of religion we studied? What insights did you gain about religious diversity? What did you learn about yourself?

This Signature Assignment assesses SLOs 1 through 6, and ELOs 2, 6, 9 and 10.

Analysis: The Role of Myth in Religion

In this assignment, you will explore how religious myths convey deeper truths and values in a cultural context. To start, select a myth or story from one religious tradition we’ve studied this semester (e.g., the story of Krishna, the life of the Buddha, the story of Noah’s Ark, etc.)

Then write a short essay (500-750 words), using at least 2 scholarly sources, and answering the following:

- What is the central message or lesson of the myth?
- How does this myth explain the human condition, the nature of the divine, or the relationship between humans and the divine?
- How does the myth reflect the cultural and historical context in which it originated?
- Why do you think myths like this one endure in religious traditions, even in modern times?
- Are there any modern equivalents to this religious myth in today’s secular culture? How do it, or they, compare in terms of impact and influence?
- End with a meta-cognitive reflection: What did this exercise reveal to you about the nature of myth or narrative? What surprised you? What did you learn about yourself in the process of doing the assignment?

This Signature Assignment assesses SLOs 1, 2, 3, 4 and 6, and ELOs 2, 6, and 9.

Course Content:

Along with PHR-120, Bergen's course offerings in Religious Studies include PHR-121: Religions of the World, PHR-122: Women and Religion, and PHR-124: The Christian Scriptures.

Most students who enroll in BCC Religion courses choose PHR-120 or PHR-121. Some of these students will take both of these courses. It is especially important that PHR-121 have a distinct identity from PHR-120. Although most instructors in PHR-120 will include some discussion of specific religious traditions, PHR-120 should not be essentially a comparative study of religion. Rather, PHR-120 is an introduction to the multidisciplinary field of Religious Studies and to the major themes and issues in religious thought. Accordingly, course content should be organized topically, rather than by tradition.

Course Texts and/or Other Study Materials:

There are many "Introduction to Religious Studies" texts available. Most instructors will likely want to build their course around some general introductory-level textbook. Instructors will also want to provide access to sacred texts, and this can often be done using freely available online resources. Because Religious Studies is inevitably multicultural, texts should be chosen which are not limited solely to a Western tradition. Some standard and very useful texts are the following:

Cunningham and Kelsay, The Sacred Quest: An invitation to the Study of Religion (6th Ed.)

Kessler, Studying Religion: An Introduction Through Cases (3rd ed.)

Livingston, Anatomy of the Sacred: An Introduction to Religion (6th ed.)

Richter, Religion: A Study in Beauty, Truth, and Goodness

Writing, Research, and Critical Thinking Requirements

PHR-120 requires students to complete a variety of critical thinking and writing assignments. It also requires students to employ techniques of scholarly research in some of their assignments. These assignments may include class discussions and debates requiring the application of critical thinking skills, short in-class essays, out-of-class writing projects (journals, research papers, argument-analysis papers, book reviews, etc.), tests and examinations containing essay components, and so forth. Instructors will respond to and comment on students' writing in detail.

Grading Policy:

A student's final grade for the course is based primarily on his or her performance on the required work for the course (writing assignments, examinations, class presentations, etc.) and on his or her overall mastery of the material covered in the

course. A student's class participation may also be evaluated, and the grade thereon may be used as a factor in determining the student's final grade for the course; but a class participation grade will count for no more than twenty percent (20%) of the final grade. A student's research and writing work will count at least fifty percent (50%) of the final grade.

BCC Attendance Policy:

All students are expected to attend every scheduled meeting of each course in which they are registered. Attendance and lateness policies and sanctions are to be determined by the instructor for each section of each course. These will be established in writing on the individual course outline. Attendance will be kept by the instructor for administrative and counseling purposes.

Philosophy and Religion Departmental Attendance Policy:

Students are expected to attend class regularly and punctually. Attendance will be taken at each class session. It is expected that class will be conducted such that students will benefit in their written work by the lectures and class discussion. If students occasionally arrive late, they should be encouraged to enter quietly, not disturbing the class. If students miss class, they should be encouraged to use the course calendar to stay abreast of material. It is probably a good idea for students to find study partners and to exchange telephone numbers. Make-ups for examinations should be allowed by the instructor if, in the instructor's judgment, the student has presented a good excuse for missing the work. Instructors may penalize work which is late; however, the instructor's policies for make-ups and late work must be clearly specified on the student guide.

Include the following statement on the BCC Philosophy Club:

The Philosophy Club has functioned continuously since the late 1980's. It usually meets on Tuesdays during the Activities Period, 12:30-1:25 PM, but sometimes also on different days and at different times. I encourage you to join the club. For further information, contact the Office of Student Life or the Club Advisor, Prof. ____.

College Policy Statements:

Statement on plagiarism and/or academic dishonesty:

[Academic Matters - Bergen Community College - Acalog ACMS™](#)

Statement on the appropriate use of AI (see the following link for guidance):

[AI-Guidance-Resource-Page.pdf \(bergen.edu\)](#)

ADA statement:

[Disability Services \(Office of Specialized Services\) | Bergen Community College](#)

Sexual Harassment statement:

[HR-003-001.2018-Policy-Prohibiting-Sexual-Harassment.pdf \(bergen.edu\)](#)

Statement on acceptable use of BCC technology:

[Acceptable-Use-Policy.pdf \(bergen.edu\)](#)

Recommended Syllabus Statements from the Office of Specialized Services:

[OSS Statements | Bergen Community College](#)

Student and Faculty Support Services:

Accessibility Statement

Bergen Community College is committed to ensuring the full participation of all students in its programs. If you have a documented disability (or think you may have a disability) and, as a result, need a reasonable accommodation to participate in this class, complete course requirements, or benefit from the College's programs or services, contact the Office of Special Services (OSS) as soon as possible at 201-612-5270 or www.bergen.edu/oss. To receive any academic accommodation, you must be appropriately registered with OSS. The OSS works with students confidentially and does not disclose any disability-related information without their permission. The OSS serves as a clearinghouse on disability issues and works in partnership with faculty and all other student service offices.

Student Support Services

Bergen Community College provides exemplary support to its students and offers a broad variety of opportunities and services. A comprehensive array of student support services including advising, tutoring, academic coaching, and more are available online at <https://bergen.edu/currentstudents/>.



Sidney Silverman Library Online Resources:

[Guides BY SUBJECT - LibGuides at Bergen Community College](#)

General Search and Databases: [Library | Bergen Community College](#)

Include a Course Outline and Calendar:

Date	Ch.*	General Topic	Focus and Activity
9/5			Introductions; presentation, Icebreaker, Syllabus
9/9	1	Toward a Definition of Religion	Defining 'Religion'—analytical exercise (handout) Conversation on Exclusivism, Inclusivism, and Pluralism
9/12	2	The Nature of the Sacred	The Concept of the Sacred (incl. immanent vs. transcendent); Psalm 99 and Tao te Ching exercise (handout)
9/16	2	The Nature of the Sacred	Sacred Persons, Places and Objects Discussion of Jesus, Torah, Quran Exercise on the Katha Upanishad & Discussion of Atman and Buddha-Nature (PPT)
9/19	3	The Appearance of the Sacred	Religious Experience Hierophany Discussion: Prophets and Sacraments / Videos on Burning Bush & Prophets
9/23	3	The Appearance of the Sacred	Hierophany Discussion: Mysticism (Handout exercise on "Nirvana and Ownerless Consciousness"); Videos on Kaaba, Stupas, and Torii
9/26	3	The Appearance of the Sacred	Continued discussion and analysis of Sacred Places
9/30	4	The Language of the Sacred	Religion and Language Myth and parables Parable Exercise—Mustard Seed
10/3	4	The Language of the Sacred	The Visual Language of the Sacred Exercise and discussion of Tibetan Altars and Greek Orthodox Churches vs. Quaker Meetings
10/7	4	The Language of the Sacred	Biblical Myths: Genesis vs. Gnostic Variants Pali Canon and Oral Traditions
10/10	4/5	Ritual	Thinking critically about Rituals Video on Rituals and follow-up discussion
10/14	5	Ritual	Asceticism and Mortification Self-flagellation and crucifixion, tonsure of Hindu infant, and Sky Burial. Ritual Handout Exercise.
10/17	5	Ritual	Ritual, Community and Identity Videos on Agnihotra; demo on Buddhist Prostration.
10/21	6	Sacred Communities	American Civil Religion; Churches, Sects and Cults; Schisms
10/24	6	Sacred Communities	Monastic Life
10/28	6	Sacred Communities	Religion and Demographic Change; PBS video and then small group discussion on New Religious Movements and Dominion Theology
10/31	7	The Problem of Evil	Identifying Evil; video interview(s) with Elie Wiesel; responses to the Holocaust

11/4			LIBRARY INSTRUCTION DAY
11/7	7	The Problem of Evil	Responses to Evil Discussion of CS Lewis' "The Rival Conceptions of God"
11/11	7	The Problem of Evil	Evaluating the Major Responses to Evil
11/14	8	Religion and Morality	The Euthyphro Dilemma
11/21	8	Religion and Morality	Discussion of Sannyasis (video) and Jihad (video)
11/25	8	Religion and Morality	"Why Pray?" video and discussion of deontological and teleological justifications for prayer and the locus of prayer
11/28			THANKSGIVING
12/5	9	The Quest for Salvation	Introduction to Salvation: what, from what, and why? Origins of Soul and Heaven Video
12/9	9	The Quest for Salvation	Western views of sin and salvation Asian approaches to liberation
12/12	9	The Quest for Salvation	Index card on personal views of salvation *Due Date of Essay*
12/16			Last Class/Day of Semester

*Chapter references are to Cunningham and Kelsay's The Sacred Quest

Possible Note to Students: This Course Outline and Calendar is tentative and subject to change, depending upon the progress of the class.