

**EVIL, ETHICS, & EVERYTHING IN BETWEEN:  
CRITICAL ISSUES IN COMPARATIVE RELIGION  
COURSE SYLLABUS**

**INSTRUCTORS:** Kelsey Kingsbery, Payton Starks, and Emily Thomey,  
with Saul Boyarsky, MD, JD (OLLI)

**SPONSORING DEPARTMENT:** Department of Religion

**FACULTY SPONSOR:** David Need, Department of Religion

**TIME:** Mondays, 6:00 pm

**LOCATION:** Kilgo N Commons 002

**DESCRIPTION OF THE COURSE:**

What does the Pope think about condoms? Who is more evil: Osama or Adolf? Who holds the key to the pearly gates? How much time do we have left before the apocalypse? This twelve week course will explore some of the most pressing and profound issues facing world religions today. For the richest, most dynamic class discussions, this class will be comprised of both undergraduate students and members of Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (OLLI). The course is divided into four units: ethics, evil, religious pluralism, and eschatology. The unit on ethics will address the concept itself, its place in religious—and non-religious—life and religions' responses to contemporary issues concerning ethical questions. During the sessions on evil, we will investigate how world religions interpret the nature of evil in their traditions, how evil has been treated through several mediums of entertainment, and how the role of evil has factored into religious warfare throughout history. Our third unit explores the possibility of religious pluralism, that is whether or not all religions can be true despite conflicting cosmological, theological, and moral truth claims. Our final unit will look at the notion of eschatology and compare the ways in which world religions conceive of the end of times. Students from all religious and non-religious backgrounds are welcomed and encouraged to enroll!

**COURSE REQUIREMENTS:**

- The class will be graded on a pass/fail basis. Attendance at all classes and active participation in class discussions is expected. Students are required to attend 11 of the 12 classes. More than one unexcused absence will result in failure of the course. Participation will comprise 30% of the student's grade.
- Students are expected to complete all required readings before class in order to receive a passing grade.
- There will be a 5-page final analytical paper due in class on **April 14** on a pre-approved topic of choice that will comprise 60% of the student's grade. Students may choose from one of the three topics:
  - A more in depth exploration of one of the specific topics covered in one of the four units

- An explanation of how your views on comparative religion have changed or evolved, based on a critical analysis of course readings and discussions.
- A look at an additional issue in comparative religion not covered in the course.
- Each student is required to visit a religious center in the area and share about their experience with the class in a short oral presentation. This presentation will comprise 10% of the student's grade.

## **SYLLABUS:**

*Class One (January 14, 2008): Introduction to Course – Faculty sponsor will be attending*

This class will serve as an introduction to the various topics that will be covered throughout the semester. Each student will be asked to write a 250-word reflection in class on their personal religious beliefs and experiences.

## **UNIT ONE: ETHICS**

*Class Two (January 28, 2008): What is “Ethics”? – Faculty sponsor will be attending*

In this class we will consider the meaning and scope of “ethics,” and discuss the position of religion therein, and address the solution to contemporary ethical quandaries.

### Required Readings (46 pages):

-“Ethical Theory” compiled by Louis Pojman, (28 pages)

-“The Good, the Bad & the Difference” by Randy Cohen (7 pages)

-[http://www.bioethics.net/journal/j\\_articles.php?aid=1364](http://www.bioethics.net/journal/j_articles.php?aid=1364)

-<http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/>

*Class Three (February 4, 2008): What do these people believe? – Faculty sponsor will be attending*

This week we will explore the ethical systems of major world religions, discuss the similarities and differences among them, and investigate the motivations for ethical living.

### Required Readings (66 pages):

Selections from The World's Religions by Irving Sparks:

pp. 12-22 (Hinduism)

pp. 82-88 & 103-119 (Buddhism)

pp. 221-223 & 242-257 (Islam)

pp. 286-296 (Judaism)

pp. 339-346 (Christianity)

*Class Four (February 11, 2008): What does the Pope think about condoms?*

This class will focus on world religions' responses to some of the most controversial contemporary social issues including contraception, abortion, euthanasia and bioethics.

Required Readings (42 pages):

-Vatican debates contraception

<http://media.www.dailyillini.com/media/storage/paper736/news/2006/05/04/News/Vatican.Debates.Contraception-1900751.shtml>

-“The woman and the physician facing abortion: the role of correct science in the formation of conscience and the decision making process.” by Dianne Irving PhD (hand out)

-“Human Life Begins” (handout)

-Islamic birth control

[http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south\\_asia/4523685.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/4523685.stm)

[http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?pagename=IslamOnline-English-Ask\\_Scholar/FatwaE/FatwaE&cid=1119503547108](http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?pagename=IslamOnline-English-Ask_Scholar/FatwaE/FatwaE&cid=1119503547108)

-“Kosher sex”

<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Judaism/sex.html>

-“Sexuality, birth control and childbirth in Orthodox Judaism” by Perle Feldman MD (handout)

## **UNIT TWO: EVIL**

*Class Five (February 18): How do we define evil? – Faculty sponsor will be attending*

In this class we will discuss different religious traditions' interpretations of evil in order to better understand how different world religions see the problem of evil.

Required Readings (66 pages):

Selections from Evil and the Response of World Religions:

-pp.3-16 (Judaism)

-pp.43-56 (Christianity)

-pp.70-80 (Islam)

-pp.109-116 (Buddhism)

-pp. 130-142 (Hinduism)

-“Moral evil: the comparative response” by Stephen C Layman (23 pages)

*Class Six (February 25): Can evil be entertaining?*

During this class we will investigate the notion of evil as a viable form of entertainment throughout history as displayed in literature, film, theater, and music.

Required Readings (39 pages):

Selections from Religion and its Monsters:

-pp. 71-85 (Literature)

-pp. 141-157 (Screen Monsters)

-pp. 159-171 (Eco-Monsters in Film)

*Class Seven (March 3): Why does religion inspire war?*

This class will focus on different religious wars throughout history and the role of evil in justifying their occurrence.

Required Readings (42 pages):

Selections from Can Faith Make Peace?:

-p. 7-17 (Middle-East conflicts)

-p. 27-47 (Religions, Hatreds, Peacemaking, and Suffering)

-p. 149-161 (Buddhist conflicts in Sri Lanka)

### **UNIT THREE: RELIGIOUS PLURALISM**

*Class Eight (March 17): What is religious pluralism? – Faculty sponsor will be attending*

In this class we will confront the challenge that religious diversity presents in terms of conflicting truth claims. We will introduce the possibility of religious pluralism and how it approaches religious diversity.

Required Readings (73 pages):

-Chapter 11 Is Our God Listening: Exclusivism, Inclusivism, and Pluralism (from Diana Eck's book Encountering God) p. 166-199 (33 pages)

-“At Home and Not at Home: Religious Pluralism and Religious Truth” by Robert N. Bellah (6 pages)

-“The Paradox of Religious Pluralism” by Robert J. Nash Peter Laurence and Victor Kazanjian (28 pages)

-“The Challenge of Pluralism” by Diana Eck (9 pages)

*Class Nine (March 24, 2008): Has Christianity superseded Judaism? Has Islam superseded Christianity?*

This class will focus specifically on the three Abrahamic traditions, their relationship to one another, and the notion of supersessionism.

Required Readings (65 pages):

-“Jesus, Ancient Judaism, and Modern Christianity: The Quest Continues” by E.P. Sanders (16 pages)

-“[An interfaith wisdom: scriptural reasoning between Jews, Christians and Muslims](#)” by David F. Ford (21 pages)

-“Jesus and World Religions.” By Roger Haight (23 pages)

“Arguing with Muslims” by William Willimon (5 pages)

*Class Ten (March 31, 2008): Can we all pray together?*

In this class we will go beyond the monotheistic traditions and explore some of the major non-theistic and polytheistic religious traditions. Can such starkly different approaches to religiosity can be equally viable? And if so, how?

Required Readings (72 pages):

- “Revelation and Revelations : Discerning God in Other Religions. Beyond a Static Valuation” by Gavin D’Costa (18 pages)
- “[Salvations : A More Pluralistic Hypothesis.](#)” By S. Mark Heim (19 pages)
- “Dialogue and Spirituality: Can We Pray Together?” Dr. S. Wesley Ariarajah. (32 pages)
- “True Liberty Cherishes Difference” by Diana Eck (3 pages)

## UNIT FOUR: ESCHATOLOGY

*Class Eleven (April 7, 2008): How long do we have until the world ends? – Faculty sponsor will be attending*

This class will focus on the idea of eschatology and the differing ways in which world religions approach the notion of “the end of time.”

Required Readings (52 pages):

- “Eschatology: some Muslim and Christian data” by Willem Abraham Bijlefeld
- “Apocalyptic thought in Christianity and Buddhism” by Jan van Bragt (14 pages)
- “Cross-cultural Eschatology with Dives and Lazarus.” by J. Gwyn Griffiths (5 pages)
- “The last days in Judaism, Christianity and Islam” by Victor Danner (23 pages)

*Class Twelve (April 14, 2008): Conclusion and Presentation of Final Projects*

This class we will wrap up our discussion on eschatology and present our final projects to the class. Each student will give a short oral presentation on their final paper.

Required Readings (48 pages)

- “Ethics, Wealth, and Eschatology: Buddhist and Christian Strategies for Change” by Robin W. Lovin (18 pages)
- “The Meaning of Salvation.” By John Cobb, Jr. (30 pages)

## Bibliography

- Ariarajah. S. Wesley “Dialogue and Spirituality: Can We Pray Together?” *Not Without my Neighbor: Issues in Interfaith Relations Geneva: World Council of Churches* 1999.
- Beal, Timothy K. *Religion and its Monsters*. New York: Routledge, 2002.
- Beck, Norman A. “The Role of Polemic in Sacred Scriptures.” *Mature Christianity in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: The Recognition and Repudiation of the Anti-Jewish Polemic of the New Testament*. (p. 50-66)
- Bellah, Robert N. “At Home and Not at Home: Religious Pluralism and Religious Truth” *Christian Century*, 0009-5281, vol 112.
- Broadhead, Philip & Damien Keown, eds. *Can faiths make peace?: Holy wars and the resolution of religious conflicts*. London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007.
- Cenkner, William. [Evil and the response of world religions](#). 1<sup>st</sup> ed. St. Paul, Minn.; Paragon House, 1997.
- Cohen, Randy. *The Good, The Bad & the Difference*. NYC: Random House. (2002
- D’ Costa, Gavin. “Revelation and Revelations : Discerning God in Other Religions. Beyond a Static Valuation.” *Modern Theology*, 10 no 2 Apr 1994, p 165-183.
- Eck, Diana. “True Liberty Cherishes Difference.” *Los Angeles Times* July 5, 1992.
- Eck, Diana. “The Challenge of Pluralism” *Nieman Reports* “God in the Newsroom” Issue Vol. XLVII, NO. 3, Summer 1993.

Ford, David F. "An interfaith wisdom: scriptural reasoning between Jews, Christians and Muslims." *Modern Theology*, 22 no 3 July 2006 (p. 345-366)

Nash, Robert J. "The Paradox of Religious Pluralism." *Religious Pluralism in the Academy* Peter Laurence and Victor Kazanjian General Editors Vol. 2 (p. 30-58)

Pojman, Louis. *Ethical Theory*. Stamford: Wadsworth, 2002.

Smith, Huston. *The World's Religions*. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1991.

Soulen, R. Kendall "The God of Israel after Christendom" *The God of Israel and Christian Theology*. (p. 1-21)

Sander, E.P. "Jesus, Ancient Judaism, and Modern Christianity: The Quest Continues" *Jesus, Judaism, and Christian Anti-Judaism* Ed. Paula Fredrickson and Adele Reihartz. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002. (p. 31-47)

Willimon, William. "Arguing with Muslims" *The Christian Century*. Nov. 16 2004.