

Draft. Readings and assignments may change.



Abraham's Farewell to Ishmael, G. Segal, 1987

RELS 002: Religions of the West

Fall 2023 | Tu-Tr 8:30am–10am | Place TBD

Instructor: Reyhan Durmaz (rdurmaz@upenn.edu)

Office Hours: By appointment

TA: TBD

Course Description

This course surveys the intertwined histories of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. We will focus on the shared stories which connect these three traditions, and the ways in which communities distinguished themselves in such shared spaces. We will mostly survey literature, but will also address material culture and ritual practice, to seek answers to the following questions: How do myths emerge? What do stories do? What is the relationship between religion and myth-making? What is scripture, and what is its function in creating religious communities? How do communities remember and forget the past? Through which lenses and with which tools do we define “the West”?

Course Goals and Objectives

By the end of this course, you will:

- Know more about the ways in which, and the tools by which, we define “the West.”
- Better understand and appreciate the intertwined histories of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam as the major religious traditions of the West.
- Become acquainted with thinkers and works that played crucial role in the development of religions of the West.
- Know how different religions value and treat sacred stories as resources for understanding human-divine relations, the human condition, and social and cultural norms.

- Recognize how dynamics of power, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity are engaged through sacred narratives; recognize how these dynamics are affected by changing cultural assumptions and historical circumstances.
- Be able to think more analytically about categories like religion, myth, identity, and community.

Assessment

Attendance and participation 20%

Introduction letter 5%

Four in-class quizzes 40%

Final exam 35%

- The classes will consist of lectures and discussions. You are expected to read the assigned material before the class meetings.
- Your participation grade, which is 20 % of your final grade, will be based on attendance, in-class participation, and preparation of the assigned readings. Note that merely turning in the assignments and showing up in class does not get you a full participation grade.
- You will submit a short letter on Canvas introducing yourself. Please briefly tell me your year and major (if applicable); what are some of the topics you would like to learn in this class (whether or not it is on the syllabus); whether you think you might be disadvantaged in any way that would impact your success in this course; and something you are looking forward to in the next few months that is outside your coursework. This letter is confidential, it just helps me get to know you a bit better. It will count towards 5% of your final grade.
- There will be 4 **multiple-choice quizzes** (each 10% of the final grade) on the designated days (no lecture on those days). These short quizzes will test your basic knowledge of the key terms and concepts we have covered in class. As long as you regularly attend the classes and complete the readings, you do not need to do any additional preparation for these challenges.
- At the end of the term there will be a cumulative final exam (35% of your final grade), consisting of four open-ended questions. I will ask you to pick two of them. The questions will revolve around themes, concepts, and questions we have addressed and discussed in class. I will give more information closer to date. Date and time TBD.

We will read all of the primary sources in English translation. All the assigned primary sources and secondary literature are available on Canvas.

For the biblical passages we will use the New Revised Standard Version. For the qur'anic passages, Nasr's *Study Quran*, or Clearly's *Qur'an* are good. Feel free to use <http://www.biblestudytools.com> and <http://www.quran.com>, but pay attention to the translations.

Attention: Most of the material (ancient primary sources and modern-day discourse) we will read, watch, and discuss in class includes racist, sexist, homophobic, antisemitic, Islamophobic, violent, ableist, and otherwise offensive language and representation.

If you think you will be uncomfortable with discussing such content, you should not take this course.

Feel free to e-mail me if you have any questions on this matter.

Grade Scale

98-100: A+	87-89: B+	77-79: C+	67-69: D+
95-97: A	83-86: B	73-76: C	63-66: D
90-94: A-	80-82: B-	70-72: C-	60-62: D-

Statement on Inclusion and Diversity in the Classroom

University of Pennsylvania and the Department of Religious Studies considers the diversity of its students, faculty, and staff to be a strength and critical to its educational mission. Accordingly, all participants in this course are expected to contribute proactively and constructively toward creating an inclusive and respectful climate for everyone involved, both inside and outside of the classroom space. Dimensions of diversity can include sex, race, age, national origin, ethnicity, gender identity and expression, intellectual and physical ability, sexual orientation, income, faith and non-faith perspectives, socio-economic class, political ideology, education, primary language, family status, military experience, cognitive style, and communication style. As part of our shared academic endeavor as a community of scholars, it is essential that we honor the intersection of these experiences and characteristics as a core value. In this context, please note that Title IX specifically prohibits sex discrimination, including sexual misconduct, violence, harassment, and retaliation. If you or someone you know has been harassed or assaulted, you can find confidential resources and information concerning reporting options at <https://www.diversity.upenn.edu>. In this context, this course is also firmly committed to supporting the work of the Office of Student Disabilities Services, which aims to “ensure equal access to all University programs activities and services.” For further information and resources, see <https://www.vpul.upenn.edu>. If you need to request academic accommodations, feel free to speak with me after class, during office hours, or via email. For all participants in this course, the cultivation of the classroom as a healthy, equitable, and inclusive workspace is a priority.

Statement on Academic Integrity

Students are expected to adhere to the highest standards of academic honesty and integrity in this course. The Pennbook contains our Code of Academic Integrity. These standards include the responsible use and citation of sources, as well as robust intellectual engagement with others in the academic conversations fostered by the course. If you have any questions regarding what is and is not acceptable as academically honest practice, feel free to come speak to me. For more information, please see:

<https://catalog.upenn.edu/pennbook/code-of-academic-integrity/>

Schedule and Weekly Readings

Tuesday, Aug 29 – Introduction. What/where is “the West”?

Working with the terms, timeline, and resources. Studying “religion.”

No readings.

Thursday, Aug 31 – Before Monotheism: The Flood

Epic of Gilgamesh, Tablet 11 [Canvas]

[“Deucalion”](#)

Genesis [6-9](#).

Tuesday, Sept 5 – Scripture I

Alter and Kermode, *Literary Guide to the Bible*, 11–35, 375–387. [Canvas]

Kugel, *How to Read the Bible*, “Introduction.” [Canvas]

Thursday, Sept 7 – Scripture I (continued)

Alter and Kermode, *Literary Guide to the Bible*, 11–35, 375–387. [Canvas]

Kugel, *How to Read the Bible*, “Introduction.” [Canvas]

Tuesday, Sept 12 – Scripture II

Cook, *Koran: A Very Short Introduction*, 3–20. [Canvas]

Thursday, Sept 14 - The biblical myth: Narrating the beginning

Genesis [1-12](#) ; Qur'an [2:21-44](#) , [7:11-27](#) , [21:1-38](#) ; [38:71-85](#)

Life of Adam and Eve [Canvas]

Roded, "Jewish and Islamic religious feminist exegesis of the sacred books." [Canvas]

Tuesday, Sept 19 – The biblical myth: Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Isaac, Ishmael

Genesis [12-25](#) ; Qur'an [11](#) , [14](#) , [51](#)

Hughes, "My Abraham is better than yours," *Abrahamic Religions*. [Canvas]

Thursday, Sept 21 – Quiz 1

Tuesday, Sept 26 – The biblical myth: Mary of Nazareth

Mark [6:3](#) , Matthew [1:16-20](#) , Mark [15:40-47](#) , Luke [1:46-56](#) , [Protoevangelium of James](#) , Qur'an [19:1-39](#)

Gregg, "Mary," *Shared Stories*. [Canvas]

Thursday, Sep 28 – The biblical myth: Jonah

Book of [Jonah](#) ; Matthew [11-16](#) ; Qur'an [21:87-88](#) , [68:48-52](#) , [10:98](#)

Gregg, "Jonah," *Shared Stories*. [Canvas]

Ladin, *Soul of the Stranger: Reading God and Torah from Transgender Perspective*, 1-15. [Canvas]

Tuesday, Oct 3 – The Devil

Job [1-2](#) ; Mark [1, 3, 8](#) ; Matthew [4:1-11](#) ; Luke [22](#) ; Qur'an [7:11-27](#) , [14:21-22](#) ; [20:115-123](#) ; [17:61-65](#)

Pagels, *Origin of Satan*, xiii-xxiii. [Canvas]

Baillie, *Facing the Fiend*, "Introduction." [Canvas]

Thursday, Oct 5 – Narrating the end: Apocalypse

Daniel [12](#) ; Qur'an [18:83-105](#) , [69:13-15](#) ,

Elliott, "The End Time," *Apocryphal Jesus*, 205-208. [Canvas]

Revelation (Apocalypse) of John [Canvas]

Tuesday, Oct 10 – Quiz 2

Oct 12 – 15 Fall Term Break

Tuesday, Oct 17 – Saints and sanctity

Theodoret of Cyrrihus, “Life of Simeon the Stylite.” [Canvas]

Thursday, Oct 19 – Martyrdom, a “western” concept?

Martyrdom of Polycarp. [Canvas]

Confessions of Nat Turner. [Canvas]

Tuesday, Oct 24 – Philosophy and theology

Clement of Alexandria, *The Educator.* [Canvas]

Augustine, *Confessions*, [Book 2](#). [another translation on Canvas]

Ibn Rushd, [On the Harmony of Religion and Philosophy](#). [another translation on Canvas]

Thursday, Oct 26 – Scholasticism, secularism, and the age of reason?

Readings TBD

Tuesday, Oct 31 – Quiz 3

Thursday, Nov 2 – Atheism in the West

Brammer, “Atheism in antiquity,” Cambridge Companion to Atheism. [Canvas]

Hyman, “Atheism in modern history,” Cambridge Companion to Atheism. [Canvas]

Tuesday, Nov 7– Mysticism in the West

Sales, “[Kabbalah between mystics and Madonna](#),” *JTA*

“[Sufism in New York](#),” *The Economist*

Thursday, Nov 9 – Gender, sexuality, and religion

Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* [Canvas]

Tuesday, Nov 14 – The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints

Hamer, "[The Temple Lot: Visions and realities](#)," *By Common Consent*.

Thursday, Nov 16 – Quiz 4

Tuesday, Nov 21 – Class cancelled due to AAR/SBL

*******Nov 23-26 Thanksgiving Break*******

Tuesday, Nov 28 – Race and religion

Butler, *White Evangelical Racism*. [Canvas]

Thursday, Nov 30 – Religion in/and popular culture

Flory, “Postmodern prophecy: Bob Dylan and the practices of self-subversion.” [Canvas]

Cowan, “Religion in science fiction film and television.” [Canvas]

Tuesday, Dec 5 – God, AI, and the future of religion

Readings TBD

Thursday, Dec 7 - Concluding remarks

Hughes, *Abrahamic Religions*, 57–76. [Canvas]

Final exam: In-person. Date and time TBD