

BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION IN A WORLD OF RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY

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Course Description

This course starts from the premise that biblical interpretation always happens in ways that are informed by cultural and theological conversations that surround, inform, and preoccupy biblical readers. Today, one of the most important and compelling social and theological realities is religious diversity and the frequent conflicts that involve religious difference. Though religious difference itself is clearly not a new phenomenon, awareness of and interaction with people of diverse religious traditions is a feature of life today in a different way than it was even twenty years ago. We live in a world that is interconnected by economic structures, technology, media, and migration. What difference does this reality make in the practice of biblical interpretation?

To begin, the class will give careful attention to the development of Interfaith Studies in the United States, a central disciplinary location for discussion, exchange, and scholarship that deals with the methodology and practice of cross-religious engagement. The goal of the first part of the class will be to ground ourselves in the questions, problems, and varieties of approaches that characterize the study of religious pluralism and its significance in the world today.

In the second section of the course, we will explore the religious diversity that characterized ancient Israel and Judah. What did religious diversity look like in that context? How is it similar to and different from our own experience with religious diversity?

¹ In consultation with the author, this syllabus has been edited for length, removing details particular to the author's context such as office hours and location, absence policies, honor codes, and other instructor-specific (or institution-specific) details.

In the third part of the class, we will use what we have learned about Interfaith Studies and the reality of religious diversity in the ancient world as a tool for posing questions of the dynamics of religious diversity in biblical texts *and* as a tool for posing questions of the process of biblical interpretation itself. Questions that will shape this portion of the class are: How was religious diversity experienced and interpreted in the ancient Near East? How was “otherness” perceived and encountered? How do particular biblical narratives reflect and interpret the religious diversity of their historical contexts? Finally, what difference does it make to read biblical texts through the lens of Interfaith Studies? What are our obligations to our religiously diverse context in the practice of biblical interpretation? What kinds of questions does Interfaith Studies help us to ask of biblical texts and their interpretation? What might biblical literature offer the conversation today about interfaith encounter? In order to address these questions, we will examine one biblical text in depth, the book of Ruth, which offers a location for fruitful exploration of religious diversity, hospitality, and cross-cultural engagement.

This course is designed as an upper level seminar course for students who have already completed introductory level coursework in the study of Religion.

Learning Outcomes

At the end of this class, you will be able to:

- ▶ Articulate the major issues and approaches to the study of religious pluralism and the goals of Interfaith Studies;
- ▶ Demonstrate acquaintance with the dynamics of religious diversity in the Bible and the ways religious diversity is perceived in biblical texts; and
- ▶ Use the approaches of Interfaith Studies to pose questions of the cross-religious and cross-cultural dynamics in the Bible, especially the book of Ruth, and to conceptualize a method of biblical interpretation that actively incorporates Interfaith Studies.

Required Texts

- ▶ Eboo Patel, *Sacred Ground: Pluralism, Prejudice, and the Promise of America* or *Acts of Faith: The Story of an American Muslim, the Struggle for the Soul of a Generation*, 2007
- ▶ Catherine Cornille and Christopher Conway, eds., *Interreligious Hermeneutics*, 2010
- ▶ Frances Stavrakopoulou and John Barton, eds. *Religious Diversity in Ancient Israel and Judah*, 2010

Assignments

1. Conversation Starters: Twice during the semester, each student will write a conversation starter, a 1-2 page paper that poses questions of the reading assignment for the class in order to jump-start discussion. The paper should assume other students' familiarity with the reading and should therefore avoid summary. The paper should pose questions and seek connections between the assigned reading previous class discussions.
2. Contributions to class discussion: Please come to class having read the assigned materials and be ready to contribute to discussion with text-based and productive questions and observations.

3. At the end of each of the three major blocks of the class, each student will write a paper that synthesizes the learning in each block.
- Part I: Religious Pluralism and the Interfaith Movement
At the end of this section, students will write a critical reflection paper (3-5 pages) that collects and organizes their understanding of the major problems and opportunities in interreligious hermeneutics and the significant questions that merit their further consideration.
 - Part II: Religious Diversity in Ancient Israel and Judah
At the end of this section, students will write a critical reflection paper (3-5 pages) on Stayrakopoulou and Barton's *Religious Diversity in Ancient Israel and Judah* that synthesizes and integrates the material and answers the following question: According to Stayrakopoulou and Barton and the contributors to this volume, how should one understand religious diversity in Israel and Judah? Based on our reading and class discussions, what portrait of religious diversity in Israel and Judah has emerged for you? What further questions do you have?
 - Part III: Reading the Bible in the Context of Religious Diversity: The Book of Ruth
Collaborative biblical interpretation is one experimental way of employing an Interfaith methodology of biblical interpretation. The goal of this paper/project is to read the book of Ruth in partnership with someone who identifies with a religious tradition that is different from your own. The following are the steps required to write this paper:
 - ▷ Find a reading partner, someone you identify as different from yourself religiously, ideologically, or philosophically. This person might be a member of the class or he/she might be someone else you know. This individual should be able to meet with you 3 times to discuss the book of Ruth. (No previous familiarity with the book is required.)
 - ▷ Read the book of Ruth separately and together during the course of three 45 minutes meetings. Read slowly and carefully, identifying places of confusion, overlapping assumptions, and differences of opinion. The goals of these conversations is to address the following question: How does our religious difference help us to pose new questions of the book of Ruth? What new understanding emerges from reading the book of Ruth in a context in which religious difference is treated as an asset in biblical interpretation, as opposed to a hindrance?
 - ▷ Your 4-6 page paper should reflect the results of your partnered reading of Ruth using this methodology. What did you see about the book of Ruth that you had not seen prior to these conversations? Be specific about your results. Your reflection should be textually based and concrete. Stay away from broad observations and try to stick to close exegetical analysis.

COURSE SCHEDULE

Week 1

- ▶ Monday: Introduction to Course and Discussion of Syllabus

Part 1: Religious Pluralism and Interfaith Studies

- ▶ Wednesday: Read Eboo Patel, *Sacred Ground*, Parts I and II

Week 2

- ▶ Monday: Read Eboo Patel, *Sacred Ground*, Part III
- ▶ Wednesday: Cornille and Conway, eds., *Interreligious Hermeneutics*, 2010, chapters 1-2

Week 3

- ▶ Monday: Cornille and Conway, eds., *Interreligious Hermeneutics*, 2010, chapters 3-4
- ▶ Wednesday: Cornille and Conway, eds., *Interreligious Hermeneutics*, 2010, chapters 5-6

Week 4

- ▶ Monday: Cornille and Conway, eds., *Interreligious Hermeneutics*, 2010, chapters 7-8
- ▶ Wednesday: Cornille and Conway, eds., *Interreligious Hermeneutics*, 2010, chapters 9-10
- ▶ Friday: First paper due (see description above)

Part II: Religious Diversity in Ancient Israel and Judah

Week 5

- ▶ Monday: Stayrakopoulou and Barton, *Religious Diversity in Ancient Israel and Judah*, chapters 1-3
- ▶ Wednesday: Stayrakopoulou and Barton, *Religious Diversity in Ancient Israel and Judah*, chapters 4-6

Week 6

- ▶ Monday: Stayrakopoulou and Barton, *Religious Diversity in Ancient Israel and Judah*, chapters 7-8
- ▶ Wednesday: Stayrakopoulou and Barton, *Religious Diversity in Ancient Israel and Judah*, chapters 9-10

Week 7

- ▶ Monday: Spring Break
- ▶ Wednesday: Spring Break

Week 8

- ▶ Monday: Stayrakopoulou and Barton, *Religious Diversity in Ancient Israel and Judah*, chapters 11-12
- ▶ Wednesday: Second paper due (see description above)

Part III: Reading the Bible in the Context of Religious Diversity: The Book of Ruth

Initial Encounters with Ruth

Week 9

- ▶ Monday: Read The Book of Ruth, Chapters 1-2 and “Violence in The Fields?: Translating, Reading, and Revising in Ruth 2.” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 63.3 (2001): 444-463. (ATLA)
- ▶ Wednesday: Read The Book of Ruth, Chapter 3-4 and Tod Linafelt, “Narrative and Poetic Art in the Book of Ruth,” *Interpretation*, 64/2 Apr 2010, p 118-129.

What does it mean to be a Moabite in the Hebrew Bible?

Week 10

- ▶ Monday: Read: Eunhy Lee, “Ruth the Moabite: Identity, Kinship, and Otherness,” in *Engaging the Bible in a Gendered World: An Introduction to Feminist Biblical Interpretation in Honor of Katharine Doob Sakenfeld*, 2006, p. 89-101.
- ▶ Wednesday: Read Neil Glover, “Your People, My People: An Exploration of Ethnicity in Ruth,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, 33/3 Mar 2009, p. 293-313.

Week 11

- ▶ Monday: Read Athalya Brenner, “Ruth: the Art of Memorizing Past Enemies, Ambiguously,” in *Remembering Biblical Figures in the late Persian and Early Hellenistic Periods: Social Memory and Imagination*, 2013, pp. 306-310.
- ▶ Wednesday: Read Agnethe Siquans, “Foreignness and Poverty in the Book of Ruth: a Legal Way for a Poor Foreign Woman to be Integrated into Israel.” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 128.3 (2009): 443-452.

Ruth and Religious Conversion

Week 12

- ▶ Monday: Read Anne-Mareike Wetter, "Ruth, A Born-Again Israelite? One Woman's Journey Through Space and Time" in *Imagining the Other and Constructing Israelite Identity in the Early Second Temple Period*, edited by Ehud Ben Zvi, Diana Vikander Edelman.
- ▶ Wednesday: Read Robert L. Cohn, "Overcoming Otherness in the Book of Ruth," in *Imagining the Other and Constructing Israelite Identity in the Early Second Temple Period*, edited by Ehud Ben Zvi, Diana Vikander Edelman.

Reading Ruth in International Perspective

Week 13

- ▶ Monday: Read Dorothea Erbele-Küster, "Immigration and Gender Issues in the Book of Ruth," *Voices from the Third World*, 25 (2002): 32-39. Read Juliana Claassens, "Resisting Dehumanization: Ruth, Tamar, and the Quest for Human Dignity." *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*. Oct 2012, Vol. 74 Issue 4, p. 659-674. (ATLA)
- ▶ Wednesday: Read Musa W. Dube, "Divining Ruth for International Relations," in *Postmodern Interpretations of the Bible: A Reader* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001). Read: Jione Havea, "Stirring Naomi: Another Gleaning at the Edges of Ruth," in *Reading Ruth in Asia*, pp. 111-124.
- ▶ Friday: Final paper due (see description above)

Week 14

- ▶ Monday: Discussion of Final Papers in Class
- ▶ Wednesday: Synthesis and Integration