

RELIGION AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

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Course Overview

This course focuses on the ways in which diverse religions traditions conceive of and practically respond to the critical issues in the building of a just society. The topics to be covered include civil rights movement, peace and anti-violence initiatives, responses to poverty, racial and gender justice, and interfaith efforts towards building positive relationships across religious, racial, and ethnic lines. These topics have an intrinsic interest for any responsible member of our society; moreover, the global situation today makes it all the more imperative that we acquire a nuanced insight into the social ramifications of religion. In order to develop such an insight, we will engage sources from Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Judaism, and other religious traditions, ranging from selections from their foundational texts to the writings by contemporary religious activists and thinkers such as MLK, The Dalai Lama, Dorothy Day, Eboo Patel, and other figures who have shaped the social and spiritual landscapes of our country and the entire world.

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.

Required Texts

- ▶ Martin Luther King, Jr. *I Have a Dream: The Writings and Speeches That Changed the World*
- ▶ Dorothy Day, *Loaves and Fishes*
- ▶ Arnold Kotler, *Engaged Buddhist Reader*
- ▶ Eboo Patel, *Sacred Ground: Pluralism, Prejudice, and the Promise of America*
- ▶ Robert Jones, *Progressive and Religious*

Learning Outcomes

Students who successfully complete this course will be able to:

- ▶ Identify and discuss select ideas, practices, and ethical teachings of several religious traditions that bear upon the critical “social justice” issues covered in the course;
- ▶ Demonstrate an understanding of the roles religion has played historically and continues to play in human society and life;
- ▶ Discuss religious traditions and worldviews different from their own in an informed, reflective and appreciative manner;
- ▶ Demonstrate their ability to read and interpret primary sources and scholarly writings, and to effectively communicate their findings in written and oral forms; and
- ▶ Complete an independent project, including choosing a topic, locating sources, selecting appropriate methods and procedures, and presenting their results in a suitable format.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS AND ASSIGNMENTS

Class participation

Your participation is vital to the success of our course, so please take this requirement seriously! To truly flourish in this class you must be an avid reader of relatively complex and lengthy texts as well as someone who enthusiastically shares one’s discoveries with the fellow seekers on the path. If you decide to be in this class, I will assume that you have seriously committed yourself to these requirements.

Discussion Focus

At several points during the term you will be asked to provide focus for our class discussion, by choosing passages in the readings that seem especially interesting and important, and preparing questions or interpretations you could share with your classmates. Your task here is not to summarize the readings but to focus our class discussion on specific issues that you think are crucial to our understanding of the material. This is a group assignment (2-3 people in a group); we’ll put a list of groups and our discussion focus schedule together later in the term, once our class list is finalized.

Reading Journal

This course is a reading- and writing-intensive course that will focus on a close reading and analysis of a wide range of course texts. The Reading Journal assignment is designed to help you with this process, by allowing you to engage with the course readings in an in-depth and creative way. You are asked to identify important themes and key concepts introduced in the readings, and also—very important!—to engage with them in a critical (serious/scholarly) yet imaginative way, by offering your own interpretations and reflections. Some questions you might keep in mind while you are doing your readings and then work on your writing:

- ▶ What are the central ideas, ethical teachings, practices, and issues introduced in the readings?
- ▶ How do they relate to their historical and cultural context? Are they still relevant in our society, and why?
- ▶ How do the issues presented in the readings relate to your experience outside of this class (other classes, personal experiences)?
- ▶ Which interpretations, arguments, and conclusions presented in the readings do you find particularly compelling, and which ones would you like to modify?

There are 13 possible entries scheduled for the term (see the Schedule of Readings); you must do 10 of them, otherwise your grade for this assignment will suffer. Your papers must be 550-750 words (2-3 pages) in length, typed, with standard font and margins. If you write more than that I'll forgive you, but if you write less, beware! Completed entries will be graded as follows: 1="does not meet expectations," 2="meets expectations," 3="excellent." You will automatically receive 20 points ("B" range) on this assignment as long as you get "2" on all 10 entries; each "1" will cost you one point off, each "3" will give you an additional point, up to 25 points altogether (= "A").

Research Project

The independent research project is worth 50 points. With the instructor's prior approval, you will select and research a topic relevant to the broadly defined area of our course. You are welcome to search for a topic that would be of special interest to you personally, and/or particularly relevant to your specific field of study or professional plans for the future.

Results of your research will be presented in a 8-10 page final paper. You will also be asked to prepare a short oral presentation, to report on your findings to the rest of the class, during one of the class sessions reserved for these purposes. Detailed guidelines for this project will be distributed and discussed in class later in the term.

Grading

1. Class Participation - 25 points
2. Discussion Focus - 10 points
3. Reading Journal - 25 points
4. Independent Project - 50 points
5. Research Topic - 1 point
6. Research Sources (Library Exercise) - 1 point
7. Research Proposal - 3 points
8. First Draft - 10 points
9. Oral Presentation + Reviews - 10 points

COURSE SCHEDULE

All readings must be completed prior to the class period for which they are assigned.

Unit 1 - Introduction

Week 1: *Introduction to the Course*

Unit 2 - Progressive and Religious: The New Face of Religion in American Public Life

Week 2: *Progressive and Religious*

- ▶ Readings: Robert Jones, *Progressive and Religious* (hereafter “Jones”), pp. 1-23, and 171-191
- ▶ Reading Journal 1 Due
- ▶ Discussion Assignment: Which issues/facts/interpretations/conclusions presented in the reading did you find particularly interesting, compelling, or perhaps questionable? How does this material relate to the current situation in our society? to your own experience? Come up with a specific example or two to illustrate your response.

Week 3: *Lifting the Line of History: How Progressive Jews Are Healing the World*

- ▶ Readings: Jones, ch. 1
- ▶ Excerpts from the Hebrew Bible (handout)
- ▶ Discussion Assignment: Which issues/facts/interpretations/conclusions presented in the reading did you find particularly interesting, compelling, or perhaps questionable? How does this material relate to the current situation in our society? to your own experience? Come up with a specific example or two to illustrate your response.
- ▶ Reading Journal 2 due

Week 4: *More Truth Breaking Out: How Progressive Christians Are Seeking the Reign of God on Earth*

- ▶ Readings: Jones, ch. 2
- ▶ Excerpts from the Gospels (handout)
- ▶ Discussion Assignment: Which issues/facts/interpretations/conclusions presented in the reading

did you find particularly interesting, compelling, or perhaps questionable? How does this material relate to the current situation in our society? to your own experience? Come up with a specific example or two to illustrate your response.

- ▶ Reading Journal 3 due

Week 5: *Knowing One Another: How Progressive Muslims Are Fostering Justice, Beauty, and Pluralism*

- ▶ Readings: Jones, ch. 3
- ▶ Excerpts from the Qur'an (handout)
- ▶ Discussion Assignment: Which issues/facts/interpretations/conclusions presented in the reading did you find particularly interesting, compelling, or perhaps questionable? How does this material relate to the current situation in our society? to your own experience? Come up with a specific example or two to illustrate your response.
- ▶ Reading Journal 4 due

Unit 3 - "I Have a Dream": Religion in the Civil Rights Movement

Week 5: *The Dream Bursts Forth*

- ▶ Readings: MLK, *I Have a Dream* (hereafter MLK), "To the Reader" (pp. ix-xii), "Editor's Introduction" (pp. xiii-xxi), "Chronology" (pp. xxiii-xxx), ch. 1-2 (pp. 2- 33), ch. 9-11 (pp. 73-106)
- ▶ Video: *I Have a Dream* (in class)
- ▶ Reading Journal 5 due

Week 6: *Love, Justice, and Nonviolence: The Interreligious Foundations of the Civil Rights Movement*

- ▶ Readings: MLK, ch. 3 (pp. 29-33), 5-8 (pp.39-62)
- ▶ Abraham Joshua Heschel, "[Religion and Race](#)"
- ▶ Video: Gandhi (in class)
- ▶ Reading Journal 6 due

Week 7: *"Our God Is Marching On!"*

- ▶ Readings: MLK, ch. 12-15 (pp. 107-134)
- ▶ MLK, ch. 16 (pp. 135-165), 18 (pp. 169-179), 20 (pp. 193-203)
- ▶ Reading Journal 7 due

Week 8: *Library Research Exercise + Spring Break*

- ▶ Meet at the library resource room
- ▶ Compose your research topic description (2-3 sentences) and bring it with you
- ▶ Enjoy spring break!

Unit 4 - "Saints for Our Time": Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker Movement

Week 9: *A Troublemaking Saint: Life and Legacy of Dorothy Day*

- ▶ Readings: Jim Forest, "[The Trouble with Saint Dorothy](#)"
- ▶ Robert Ellsberg, "[Dorothy Day: Lecture on Centenary](#)"
- ▶ Jim Forest, "[The Living Legacy of Dorothy Day](#)"
- ▶ See "Dorothy Day" section on [The Catholic Worker website](#)—look around for things you might find interesting
- ▶ Video: *Entertaining Angels* (in class)
- ▶ Reading Journal 8 due

Week 10: *"Those Who Cannot See the Face of Christ in the Poor are Atheists Indeed"*

- ▶ Readings: Dorothy Day, *Loaves and Fishes* (hereafter "Day"), Foreword (p. ix), Introduction (pp. xi-xvi), Preface (pp. xvii-xviii), ch. 1-8 (pp. 3-92)
- ▶ Readings: "[The Aims and Means of the Catholic Worker](#)" and "[The Works of Mercy](#)"
- ▶ Reading Journal 9

Unit 5 - Compassion in Action: Socially Engaged Buddhism

Week 11: *Being Peace and Embodying Justice: Principles of the "Engaged Buddhism"*

- ▶ Readings: Jones, ch. 4
- ▶ Engaged Buddhist Reader (hereafter "EBR"), parts I and II
- ▶ Reading Journal 10 due
- ▶ Research Proposals due

Week 12: *Peace is Every Step: Engaged Buddhism on War and Peace, Violence and Compassion*

- ▶ Readings: *EBR*, part III
- ▶ Video: *Peace is Every Step*
- ▶ Reading Journal 11 due

Week 13: *Environment, Community, and Social Change*

- ▶ Readings: *EBR*, parts IV-VI
- ▶ Reading Journal 12 due
- ▶ Rough Draft/Outline due

Unit 6 - The Promise of America: Religious Freedom, Pluralism and Interfaith Cooperation

Week 14: American Pluralism

- ▶ Readings: Eboo Patel, *Sacred Ground: Pluralism, Prejudice, and the Promise of America* (hereafter “Patel”), Introduction and Parts I, II, III, and Conclusion
- ▶ Reading Journal 13 due
- ▶ Individual consultations with professor on paper

Week 15: Oral Presentations + Final Paper Due