

Religion and World Politics Syllabus

This syllabus explores each major religion of the world and the countries/regions of the world in which it impacts politics.

Shared with Permission¹ In 2014, Dr. Patrick Homan participated in a Teaching Interfaith Understanding faculty development seminar, run in partnership between the Council of Independent Colleges and Interfaith America, and generously funded by the Henry Luce Foundation.

Course Objectives

This course has a number of goals or objectives for this semester:

1. Provide students with a basic understanding of the major world religions.
2. Introduce students to the method of interfaith learning/leadership.
3. Examine how politics and religion interact throughout the world:
 - o How do religions interact with one another? (e.g. Christianity vs. Islam)
 - o What type of intra-religious conflicts are there? (Catholic/Protestant, Sunni/Shia)
 - o How can religion serve as an avenue for peace-building/making?
 - o How does religion play a role in other important facets of world politics (besides conflict and peace)? Examples include:
 - o Governance/government types (democracy, authoritarianism, theocracy)
 - o Human rights
 - o Economic development
 - o Globalization
 - o Political parties and elections
 - o Civil society

This course will attempt to accomplish these goals by exploring each major religion of the world and the countries/regions of the world in which it impacts politics. This will be done after a proper introduction to the major world religions themselves, the concept of interfaith leadership, and an overview of religion in the political science literature. Then we will proceed with a trip around the world via in-depth examinations of case studies in order to study the themes mentioned above.

Required Texts and Materials

This course will require three textbooks as well as provide you with chapters from many other influential works on the topic.

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

- Timothy D. Sisk, ed. Between Terror and Tolerance: Religious Leaders, Conflict, and Peacemaking (Georgetown Univ. Press), 2011.
- Hamid and McCants, Rethinking Political Islam (Oxford Univ. Press), 2017.
- Dubensky, ed. Peacemakers in Action: Vol. 2 Profiles in Religious Peacebuilding (Cambrdge Univ. Press), 2016.

Books Heavily Drawn From

- Samuel Huntington, The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order (1996).
- Shadi Hamid, Islamic Exceptionalism (2016).
- Robert Putnam, American Grace (2012).
- Jeffrey Haynes, ed. Routledge Handbook of Religion and Politics, 2nd ed. (2016).

Course Assignments

- Attendance/Participation: 10%
- Quizzes/Homework: 25%
- Research & Response Journal: 30%
- Interfaith Project: 35%

Assignment Descriptions

Attendance/Participation

Attendance and participation are important to your success in this course and so I expect you to attend every class session. I will take attendance every day. Each student is allowed two absences or personal days – excused or unexcused does not matter – so plan your semester accordingly. Furthermore, your participation in class is reliant on your attendance, so if you are often absent your participation grade will also suffer.

Quizzes

Frequently throughout the semester, students will be quizzed in order to make sure they are reading the required materials as well as following along in class. Most of these quizzes will be announced but they also could be of the ‘pop’ quiz variety. As long as students are keeping up with class materials, quizzes should not be too difficult.

Research & Response Journal

Each week from weeks 4-14, students should pick a topic discussed in class that they want to learn more about. Students will collect research on the topic along with their critical thinking reflection – the professor will provide a number of prompts for students to answer and be able to connect their thoughts and research to themes of the course. The entries of this journal will be due every weekend. The objective of this assignment is to allow students to pursue a topic of their choice outside of class and chew on its significance, as well as to show their progression in learning about the topic of religion and world politics.

Interfaith Project

After completing the interfaith training at the beginning of the semester, students will decide how they want to pursue becoming an interfaith leader outside of the classroom. They will decide on a project topic (possibly with a partner or group) that they want to pursue outside of class. This could be a range of topics but need to be within the realm of experiential learning (community based learning, volunteering, and any other type of experience in which students can get a first-hand experience with people of different faiths and how that interacts with politics). Project ideas will be generated in the classroom together as well as one on one with the professor. Students will work on the project outside of class throughout the semester, produce a research paper on their experiences, and present to the class during finals week. The Interfaith America website will also provide some guidance and examples of previous projects (videos, interviews, etc.).

Tentative Course Calendar

Class meets once per week for 15 weeks

Unit I – Introduction and Background

Week 1: Introduction to World Religions

- Introduction to Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism
- Guiding Question: How are the religions of the world similar? Different?

Week 2: Introduction to Interfaith

- Completion of Interfaith Leadership Curriculum lessons/modules
- Guiding Questions: What is interfaith? How are we using interfaith in our course? How can we apply interfaith into the study/practice of world politics?

Week 3: The resurgence of religion, clash or conversation?

- Huntington's Clash of Civilizations and Responses to Huntington
- Guiding Questions: Why is religion "back" or resurgent in politics today? What does this mean – clash or conversation? Conflict or peace-building? Do you think Huntington was right/do you think the Clash is happening today?

Unit II – Christianity: United States, Europe, and Latin America

Week 4: Religion & Politics in the United States

- Putnam's American Grace
- Case study: The Trump Travel Ban
- Guiding Questions: Is the United States a "Christian nation"? What would the founders say? How does religion influence American foreign policy? As millennials become less religious, what happens to American politics?

Week 5: Catholicism & Latin America

- Case study: Religion in Communist Cuba
- Case study: The Catholic Church and the Crises of Central America/Mexico
- Guiding Questions: What role has the Catholic Church played in the political history of LA? What is Liberation Theology? Is Catholicism on the decline in Latin America? Why? What role should the Pope play in world politics? In Latin America?

Week 6: Secularism, Christianity, and Identity & Western Europe

- Religion and ‘Liberal’/Secular Democracy
- Refugee Crisis in Europe → rise of religion and right-wing politics
- Case study: Secularism in France
- Case study: Turkey and the EU – fears of ‘Eurabia’
- Case study: Lessons from Northern Ireland and Bosnia
- Guiding Question: Can the European project effectively deal with religious diversity?

Week 7: Eastern Orthodox in Russia/Eastern Europe

- Religion and Authoritarianism
- Religion and post-communism
- Guiding questions: What is the relationship between church and state in Russia now? How is the Orthodox Church central to the Russian national identity?

Unit III – Islam: Middle East and Africa

Week 8: The Arab Spring – Islam and Democracy

- Case study: Tunisia
- Case study: Egypt
- Case study: Turkey
- Guiding Questions: Is Islam exceptional in its compatibility with democracy/secularism? Was the Arab Spring the last hope for democracy in the Middle East?

Week 9: The Conflicts of the Middle East

- Islamic terrorism – ISIS and al Qaeda
- Israel and Palestine
- Case study: The Syrian Crisis
- Case study: Sunni vs. Shia (Yemen, Iraq/Iran, Saudi Arabia)
- Guiding Question: What is the best way to combat the role that religion plays in modern terrorism?

Week 10: Governance in Africa

- Religion and ethnicity in Africa
- Religion and post-colonialism (Rwanda and Uganda)
- Islam and genocide in Sudan

- Guiding Question: How can Africa overcome the legacy of divisions created by colonialism?

Week 11: Peacemaking and development in Africa

- Ending the Civil War in Mozambique
- Islam and democracy in Nigeria
- Religion and peace in Angola and Sierra Leone
- Guiding Question: What role should outside players (US, UN, China) have in creating peace in Africa?

Unit IV – Asian Religions

Week 12: China and Tibet

- Religion in Communist and modern China
- The Dalai Lama and Tibetan politics
- The Falun gong and the Uighurs
- Guiding Question: How does religion threaten the Chinese government's hold on power?

Week 13: India and Pakistan

- The history of the partition – Modi and modern Hindu nationalism
- Communalism and Hindu-Muslim violence
- The nuclearization of religious conflict
- Kashmir and Sri Lanka
- Guiding Question: India and Pakistan were both founded as secular states, are they really?

Week 14: Southeast Asia

- Islam in Indonesia – Democracy works?
- Myanmar and the Rohingya – violent Buddhism?
- Catholicism in the Philippines
- Guiding Question: Is economic growth the best path to overcome religious differences?

Unit V – Class Wrap-Up

Week 15: Class Wrap-Up

- What have we learned?
- How can we use interfaith out in the world?
- What skills are needed the most to build peace and avoid clashes?