

Religion and the Human Quest

A syllabus that considers human existence in relation to the sacred.

*Shared with Permission*¹ In 2014, Dr. Russ Arnold 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. For information on future seminars, and to access more resources created by seminar alumni, visit The Council of Independent Colleges.

Course Description

Considering human existence in relation to the sacred and drawing on Eastern and Western religious traditions, this course explores religious perspectives on human questions about life, suffering, goodness, and ultimacy. Since the beginning of time, people have been encountering others who have significantly different views of the world and different practices and beliefs about how to live in that world. In our contemporary world, contact with religious difference is the norm, not the exception. Such encounters with religious others have the potential to change us, to change the way we see the world and the ways we understand our place and vocation in the world.

This course is an invitation to witness and discuss compelling stories of religious encounter (some biographical and some fictional), to experience some of the rich religious diversity in our local community, and to deepen our understanding of the ways our own encounters with religious difference has and will continue to change us.

Required Texts

- Peace, Jennifer Howe, Or N. Rose, and Gregory Mobley, *My Neighbor's Faith: Stories of Interreligious Encounter, Growth, and Transformation*. Orbis, 2012.
- Nouwen, Henri J. M. *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Meditation on Fathers, Brothers, and Sons*. Doubleday, 1992.
- Eck, Diana L. *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras*. Beacon Press, 2003.

¹ In consultation with the authors (Dr. Russ Arnold and Ali Meehan (Peer Mentor), Regis University), 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.

Ignatian Pedagogy (A basic framework for our learning experiences and our reflection writing)

- Context – understanding who we are and where we are coming from.
- Experience – engaging and encountering the material of the course in the form of books, class discussions, classmates, site visits, interviews, experiments, etc.
- Reflection – making meaning out of the experience based on our own context.
- Action – responding to the experience and the meaning we made of it.
- Evaluation – assessing the significance and effectiveness of the learning process and setting parameters for future learning.

General Learning Goals

- Frame substantive **questions** from the perspective of at least two different religious traditions that contribute to our understanding of who we are and how we want to live in the world.
- Explain how a range of religious traditions address or **approach** such questions according to their own context, and how these varied responses relate to our own.
- Articulate the **implications** of the different religious approaches to the questions.
- Experience the rich religious and worldview **diversity** in our local community.
- Articulate, verbally and in writing, our own authentic perspective (narrative **identity**) with particular attention to impact of interfaith encounters.
- Strengthen our skills of **inquiry** (asking good questions) and **advocacy** (speaking our truth) in discussion.
- Develop effective **participation** in group discussions by actively listening for understanding, contributing appropriate topic-related comments/questions, and engaging each member to encourage active involvement from everyone.

Each of us will likely add our own personal learning goals to this list. We may also adjust some of these goals as the course progresses.

Course Requirements (How we plan to achieve these goals)

Attendance

As a communication focused seminar, our most important learning will take place during our class time together. It should be obvious that regular class attendance is a necessary prerequisite for participation. If you must be sent from class, please send me an email to let me know. More than 2 absences will affect your learning and your grade substantially.

Online Reading Response

In preparation for each Tuesday class, you will be asked to submit a 250-word reading response on the assigned reading(s) for the week. After reading the entire assigned text(s) for overall themes and context, your preparation for class should culminate with choosing 1 or more quotes or concepts from the day's reading that you want to discuss in your writing. Questions you may choose to answer in your response might be things such as: *Why did you choose this passage?*

What questions do you have about this text? What are some of the key issues each text raises? What connections do you see between this passage and others we have read or topics we have discussed? What would you like to know about how others in the class read this passage? At the beginning of class, we may ask students to introduce the passage they wrote about as a way of guiding our discussion.

Student-Led Discussions

- **Research:** Each Thursday we will have student-led class discussion. These discussions will alternate weekly between full class discussion and discussion in small groups. The topic of each discussion will be an expansion of the concepts we explored on Tuesday. At the end of class on Tuesdays, we will develop several questions or topics for further consideration. To prepare for the student-led discussion on Thursday, you will be asked to conduct further research on one of these topics and be ready to share what you learned with the rest of the class.
- **Participation:** To effectively participate in our class discussions, you should seek to exhibit many of the following behaviors:
 - Ask questions to seek deeper understanding (about the texts or about other people's comments).
 - Respond to questions (raised by me, the texts, or other students).
 - Speak your truth (especially as it relates to specific material in the text, or to your own relevant experiences).
 - Listen attentively and deeply to what all others are really saying (this means *no phones* out during class).
 - Constructively disagree with something in the text or said in class by me or another student.
 - Treat the texts, your fellow students, and me with respect and openness.
 - Be aware of the balance of the number of voices heard in the conversation (don't monopolize it or avoid it).
 - Embrace some silence as an opportunity for deeper reflection.
 - Take responsibility for guiding the direction, pace, and overall success of the discussion.

We recognize that some of you are less likely to speak up in class, especially in the large group discussion. We will often break down the class into smaller groups to change this dynamic and provide everyone more opportunity to share ideas with others. We would also encourage each of you to think of your participation holistically and focus your efforts according to your strengths. Our objective is to see evidence of your active engagement with the material (texts, ideas, discussions, etc.) of the class. Active engagement includes careful reading of the texts before class, reference to specific passages or ideas gained from your reading, explorations of connections and contrasts between texts throughout the semester, and reflection on how these texts relate to your own understanding of the issues involved. This active engagement can be shown in your writing, in your speaking in class, and/or in conversations with us outside of class, in our office, or at lunch on Tuesdays.

Interfaith Relationship

Identify a partner outside the class. You can build on a relationship you already have, or cultivate a new one with someone at Regis or in the local community. The meetings should be face to face, so it must be someone local. We are also developing a list of possible partners who have interesting stories to tell and would be happy to build a relationship with you. Over the course of the semester you are expected to meet with your partner at least 4 times, spread out during the semester. *After each meeting, you should submit a 2-page reflection in place of that week's online reading response, by the deadlines indicated on the syllabus.* The first meeting should focus on gaining a deeper understanding of your partner's **context** and background. The second meeting should include visiting their **place** of worship or a place significant to them. The third meeting should focus on learning about a religious, spiritual, or personal **practice** that is important to them. The fourth meeting is open to you and your partner. You might want to attend an event or do some service together, or talk about goals, dreams, intentions, or doubts. Your final reflection (3 pages) should include overall reflections on your learning from the relationship.

Site Visits

You will be expected to visit at least 2 different religious communities (at least 1 must be outside of Christianity) to observe and/or participate in some religious practice different from your own. One of these can be completed with your Interfaith Partner. After completing the visit, post a reflection on your experience to D2L (our online course website). *What did you notice about the space? About the community that was gathered? What did you do, see, feel, think about what happened while you were there? What role did some kind of important or sacred text play in the event, if any?* Your reflections should draw on as many of the elements of Ignatian Pedagogy described above as are relevant (context, experience, reflection, action, evaluation). In other words you should take your specific experience in the event and discuss how your background or context (as well as what we have read and discussed in class) affects your understanding of that experience and its significance. Consider also what you want to do with what you have learned from each experience.

I encourage you to try to go together with other members of this class, or other students in religion courses if you can. If you would like to propose a visit or event that is not on the list, please contact me. The Department of Religious Studies coordinates a range of opportunities to visit religious communities in the area during the semester. I will be alerting you to the dates of some of these events as the semester goes along.

Papers

Papers should be submitted to D2L as a Word document about 850 words in length. Following in the form and topics of *My Neighbor's Faith*, each paper will center around a real encounter with an "other" that has had some impact on your life and your identity. In addition to narrating the encounter, you should reflect on the effect it had on you and the implications of your different approaches to the situation on your understanding of how you want to live. Everyone must complete #1, choose one of each of the following groups (2, 3, 6, 7) and (4, 5).

1.) Encountering the Neighbor – Patel, *Interfaith Leadership*

a. "reports from explorers about meeting new neighbors across faith lines"

2.) Viewing Home Anew – Eck, *Encountering God*, ch. 1-2

a. “look back at their religious homes from the outside, glean the insights that this new perspective offers”

3.) Redrawing Our Maps – Eck, *Encountering God*, ch. 3-4

a. “the boundaries between religions that appear on maps are not always reliable or useful guides in the field”

4.) Unpacking Our Belongings – Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*

a. “confront troubling elements in their religious traditions”

5.) Stepping Across the Line – Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*

a. “transformative religious experiences mediated through the practices or among the precincts of a faith foreign to their respective authors”

6.) Finding Fellow Travelers – Eck, *Encountering God*, ch. 5-6

a. “the serendipity of unexpected relationships forged across religious boundaries”

7.) Repairing Our Shared World – Eck, *Encountering God*, ch. 7-8

a. “interreligious activists, persons whose deep attachments to their particular traditions calls them, like the biblical patriarch and Quranic prophet Abraham/Ibrahim, to devote themselves to the cause of justice and righteousness”

Final Project

Our class Final Project will be the editing and production of a volume called *Our Neighbors' Faith*. This volume will bring together our short papers into a collection that will reflect our individual and group journeys through the semester. Students will form groups to edit the different sections of the volume. As part of the editing you should meet with the other authors in your section, engaging with them to deepen your understanding of their story. We will organize a public event in the library fireside room on Thursday or Friday before finals to present *Our Neighbors' Faith* to the Regis Community.

Grade Breakdown

- Attendance: 10%
- Online Reading Responses: 20%
- Student Led Discussions: 20%
- Interfaith Relationships (4): 10%
- Site Visits: 10%
- Papers (3): 20%
- Final Project: 10%

Course Schedule

Class meets twice per week for 15 weeks

Week 1:

Tuesday:

- Topic: Course Introduction – What are our questions?
- Topic: Telling our stories

Thursday:

- Topic: How to talk about religion?
- Reading: Kessler, Ch. 1

Week 2:

Tuesday:

- Topic: Interfaith Leadership
- Reading: Patel, *Interfaith Leadership*, Intro-Ch. 1
- Writing: Online Response

Thursday:

- Topic: Sharing moments
- Writing: 10 Identity Moments

Week 3:

Tuesday:

- Topic: Encountering the Neighbor
- Reading: *My Neighbor's Faith*, Intro + Part 1
- Writing: Online Response

Thursday:

- Topic: Student Led Discussion
- Writing: Paper #1 Due on Sunday

Week 4:

Tuesday:

- Topic: Frontiers of Encounter

- Reading: Eck, *Encountering God*, Prefaces, Ch. 1, Ch. 2
- Writing: Online Response

Thursday:

- Topic: Small Group Discussion
- Writing: Interfaith Partner Reflection Due

Week 5:

Tuesday:

- Topic: Viewing Home Anew
- Reading: *My Neighbors Faith*, Part II
- Reading: Eck, *Encountering God*, Ch. 3
- Writing: Online Response

Thursday:

- Topic: Student Led Discussion

Week 6:

Tuesday:

- Topic: Redrawing Our Maps
- Reading: *My Neighbor's Faith*, Part III
- Reading: Eck, *Encountering God*, Ch. 4
- Writing: Online Response

Thursday:

- Topic: Small Group Discussion
- Writing: Paper #2 or #3 due Sunday

Week 7:

Tuesday:

- Topic: Encountering Ourselves in Story and Art
- Reading: Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, 1-58
- Writing: Online Response

Thursday:

- Topic: Student Led Discussion

- Writing: Interfaith Partner Reflection (Place) by this date

Week 8:

Tuesday: No Class – Spring Break

Thursday: No Class – Spring Break

Week 9:

Tuesday:

- Topic: Unpacking and Crossing Over
- Reading: *My Neighbor's Faith*, Part IV-V
- Writing: Online Response

Thursday:

- Topic: Small Group Discussion

Week 10:

Tuesday:

- Topic: Ourselves in/and the Other
- Reading: Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, 59-139
- Writing: Online Response

Thursday:

- Topic: Student Led Discussion
- Writing: Paper #4 or #5 due Sunday

Week 11:

Tuesday:

- Topic: Breath and Attention
- Reading: Eck, *Encountering God*, Ch. 5-6
- Writing: Online Response

Thursday:

- Topic: Small Group Discussion
- Writing: Interfaith Partner Reflection (Practice) by this date

Week 12:

Tuesday:

- Topic: Pluralism and Fellow Travelers
- Reading: *My Neighbor's Faith*, Part VI
- Reading: Eck, *Encountering God*, Ch. 7
- Writing: Online Response

Thursday:

- Topic: Student Led Discussion

Week 13:

Tuesday:

- Topic: Reshaping Our Shared World
- Reading: *My Neighbor's Faith*, Part VII
- Eck, *Encountering God*, Ch. 8
- Writing: Online Response

Thursday

- Topic: Small Group Discussion
- Writing: Paper #6 or #7 due Sunday

Week 14-15:

Group Work on Final Project Interfaith Partner Reflection (Final) due Sunday of week 15