

**TIME AND LOCATION: MTWRF 1200-1350, 248 GER (CRN 41504)**

**OFFICE HOURS AND CONTACT INFORMATION:**

PLC 327, Available by appointment [warnek@uoregon.edu](mailto:warnek@uoregon.edu)

**COURSE DESCRIPTION:** This course focuses on prevailing descriptions and explanations of “religious experience.” We will pass by discussions concerning the essence and existence of God, and instead concern ourselves with the persistent and undeniable fact of religiosity itself in human life. The fact that humans have always been oriented, in some way, toward a divine presence or a sacred space, however variable and manifold, is the starting point of our questioning. Are there common features of this sacred or religious experience in all its variety? Does it have an “essential” character? To what extent and in what way does human life necessarily entail such an experience? Is religious experience possible only on the basis of humanism, or an understanding of the human *as such*?

Accordingly, the course takes up a different theme each week. We begin by considering to what extent the scientific attitude of our time is compatible with religious experience, and how myth, poetry and art inform religious experience. Are grounding narratives necessary in human life and how is the meaning of such narratives accessible or inaccessible to scientific inquiry? During the second week we consider the phenomenon of faith as a unique existential attitude. What is faith? Can it be explained? Is faith correctly interpreted when it is opposed to knowledge? The last two weeks of this course address some criticisms of religious meaning by positioning religious practices within broader social and cultural contexts. Here we will look at the *economic* character of sacrifice, as well as the similarities between religious experiences and other, supposedly more “profane” experiences. If the “sacred” presupposes an opposition to what is “profane” or abject, how does this opposition come to be established? We will be concerned with the way in which the distinction between the sacred and the profane sustains itself. We will thus also ask about the effects of such a distinction. In the last week, we will turn to the tradition of Zen Buddhism and consider how it offers a unique example of a religious experience, apparently without belief or faith. Here we will attempt an understanding of the Buddhist experience of nothingness.

The course is reading intensive and our discussions will be oriented toward an understanding of the text being dealt with each day. I do not plan on lecturing extensively, except as a way to prompt discussion. Readings for each day will be available as .pdf files on Blackboard. Students are expected to come to class prepared to discuss the material for that day. Please come to class prepared with at least three questions from the reading. As the course proceeds, I may find it helpful to post additional readings on Blackboard. These readings may be recommended or required. It is important that you make use of the materials posted on Blackboard. There will be a break during class each day.

**COURSE REQUIREMENTS:** In addition to participation in classroom discussion, students must write two short papers, 1-2 pages long. The topics will be assigned. There will also be a mid-term exam and a final exam. See the schedule below for dates.

**BREAK DOWN OF GRADE:**

Participation: 30%

Papers: 30%

Exams: 40%

**COURSE SCHEDULE:****WEEK ONE**

- 7/23 INTRODUCTIONS: Kant and Nietzsche  
 7/24 Gadamer, “Reflections on the Relation of Religion and Science” & “Myth in the Age of Science”  
 7/25 Vernant, “The Reason of Myth”  
 7/26 Jaspers/Bultmann, *Myth and Christianity*, 3-71  
 7/27 Jaspers/Bultmann, *Myth and Christianity*, 72-117

Supplemental Readings for Week One:

- Fritz Graf, *Greek Mythology: An Introduction*, 1-56  
 Dudley Young, *Origins of the Sacred*, 5-38  
 Jean-Luc Nancy, “Myth Interrupted”  
 Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, “The Fable”

**WEEK TWO**

- 7/30 Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* **Paper #1 Due**  
 7/31 Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*  
 8/1 James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 78-126  
 8/2 James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 379-429  
 8/3 James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 485-527 **Mid-term Exam**

Supplemental Readings for Week Two:

- Hegel, *Faith and Knowledge*  
 W. James, “The Will to Believe”  
 Jaspers, “The Unconditional Imperative”  
 Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*

**WEEK THREE**

- 8/6 Becker, *Escape From Evil*  
 8/7 Becker, *Escape From Evil*  
 8/8 Becker, *Escape From Evil*  
 8/9 Bataille, “Notion of Expenditure” & “Sacrifices”  
 8/10 Bataille, *Erotism*

Supplemental Readings for Week Three

- Bataille, *Accursed Share*, 9-41  
 Bracken, *Magical Criticism*, 54-94  
 Young, *Origins of the Sacred*, 208-257  
 Marcel Mauss, *The Gift*  
 Vernant, “A General Theory of Sacrifice”

**WEEK FOUR**

- 8/13 Bataille, *Erotism* **Paper #2 Due**  
 8/14 Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*  
 8/15 Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*

8/16 **Final Exam ~ nota bene @ 3:15-5:15**

Supplemental Readings for Week Four

- Suzuki, “The Buddhist Conception of Reality”  
 Nishitani, “The I-Thou Relation in Zen Buddhism”  
 Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, 43-61

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