Across the Humanities, we study human cultural products. The academic study of religion focuses on human cultural products that pertain to entities, places, and things that are presented as transcendent, divine, sacred, holy, otherworldly, universal, etc. This course analyzes diverse characterizations of gods, from our earliest Mesopotamian myths, through early Jewish, Christian, and Muslim theologies, Medieval times, the Enlightenment, Modernity, and into Postmodernity. How have divine beings been characterized? How has the idea of god developed over time, and in relation to what cultural developments? We will begin with how gods are born in ancient Near Eastern traditions, how gods are organized into family and political structures in ancient pantheons, and the notion of there being one “Most High” god who is king of other divine beings. We will continue with early Jewish, Christian, and Muslim descriptions of god, identifying continuity with ancient Mediterranean theologies and innovations throughout late antiquity and into the middle ages. From the Renaissance and into the modern period, European developments in philosophy and science, which were thoroughly intertwined, led to changing conceptions of god and the role of the divine in the human world. Finally, in contemporary secular societies there are vast notions of gods and God, including views labeled: antitheism, atheism, agnosticism, pantheism, polytheism, theism, and monotheism. We will trace the history of these concepts, analyzing how the long-held conception of the cosmos as full of divine beings is related to more recent conceptions of a cosmos with only one god, or alternatively, no gods at all.

This is an online course, administered through Sakai. Our course has its own Sakai site that only we may access. The syllabus, online office hours, discussion forum, chat room, announcements, weekly lessons, quizzes, etc. are available through Sakai. You may contact me via email (Debra.Ballentine@rutgers.edu), and I will post course announcements through Sakai, which will also come to your university email address.

We will adhere to the University’s policy on Academic Integrity, available at http://academicintegrity.rutgers.edu/academic-integrity-policy
Readings: There is no textbook for this course. Weekly readings are available online (PDFs posted on Sakai). Each lesson will include primary texts, that is, excerpts from Mesopotamian, biblical, medieval, etc., authors as well as secondary, scholarly essays excerpted from textbooks and overviews of specific religions, historical periods, philosophical and scientific ideas, or influential thinkers.

Requirements
Engagement Activities (class participation) = 20%
    15% comprehension quizzes
    05% review exercises
Forum discussion = 25%
Exams = 45%
    15% midterm
    15% midterm
    15% final
Final project = 10%

Course structure
Our course content is organized in 6 units, each unit has 2 lessons, we will spend a week on each lesson. Each lesson contains:
    a. one video from the instructor
    b. assigned readings for the week
    c. a comprehension quiz, which you may take repeatedly; these count toward participation
    d. a discussion activity for each week, using the Sakai forums tool; student forum participation requires responding to the posts of two classmates in addition to your initial post; students will be divided into discussion groups in order to avoid diluting the discussion (5 groups of 4); during the first lesson in each unit, students will have a low-stakes discussion activity, based on an instructional prompt to identify central ideas: initial post of 5 main ideas from material; respond to another’s initial post by selecting the 3 most important of someone’s 5 main ideas; collaborate to choose the 3 most central ideas among the group; during the second lesson in each unit, students will post and discuss in forums, based on discussion prompts that require students to tie each unit’s lesson 2 to lesson 1, following the model: prompt, reply, rebuttal, (and from me) a summation of your progress as a whole class

In addition to weekly lessons, we have 2 midterm exams, 1 final exam, and a final project. Before each exam, you will have review exercises that count toward your participation grade. The final project is production of a timeline, which you will develop over the course of the semester; stages will include a draft that you submit to your peer-group, feedback from the group, a draft submitted to me, and a final draft.
Tentative schedule of topics and readings

Unit 1 - Introduction to approach and topic

Week 1 (20-23 January 2015)

lesson 1a) Introduction to the academic study of religion
What is religion? What is the place of religious studies in the humanities?
Explanation of “official” and “popular” attestations of religious ideas/practices

Week 2 (26-30 January)

lesson 1b) Introduction to class topic
What are gods, God, divine beings, non-obvious beings, etc.? How do we find and study characterizations of gods and God in “western” religious traditions? Broad overview of timeline from the ancient Near East to modern Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. What is “monotheism”? How recently was this notion developed? In what context? Why is it problematic to retroject this modern notion of monotheism onto the ancient world and biblical traditions?
read: Oxford English Dictionary entries on “monotheism,” “polytheism,” “theism,” and “atheism”; ‘Overview’ and ‘Key Events’ portions of the West Asia and Europe timelines http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/

Unit 2 - Ancient characterizations of gods

Week 3 (2-6 February)

lesson 2a) Ancient Near Eastern gods
Birth, life, family relationships, and politics among the gods; state cult and royal propaganda; family religion and personal appeals to gods

Week 4 (9-13 February)

lesson 2b) Biblical characterizations of divine beings and God
various notions of God’s position: God among peers, God above peers, God’s wife and sons
read: John J. Collins, “Israel,” (p.181-188) and pages 402-403 from Religions of the Ancient World, A Guide; El Qom, Ketef Hinnom #135-136, Kuntillet Ajrud #152-155; from Michael Coogan, A Reader of Ancient Near Eastern Texts; Deut 32:8-9; Exod 20:3; Deut 4:20-32; Deut 6:4; Isa 40:21-29; Isa 43:10-11; Ps 29, 82; Job 1-2; Jer 44
Unit 3 - Classical and late antique characterizations of gods
Week 5 (16-20 February)
lesson 3a) Greek and Roman gods and cosmos

Week 6 (23-27 February)
lesson 3b) Jewish, Christian, and Muslim ideas about the divine through late antiquity
the creation of “orthodox” notions of God and divine beings

WEEK 7 (2-6 March)
review and exam

Unit 4 - Medieval characterizations of divine beings and God
Week 8 (9-13 March)
lesson 4a) Aristotelian metaphysics
read: “Aristotelianism,” “Theology,” “Ontology,” and “Metaphysics” Brill’s New Pauly (Brill online, 2014); selections from Aristotle’s Metaphysics

Week 9 (16-20 March)
Spring Break

Week 10 (23-27 March)
lesson 4b) Theologians on cosmology and the nature of God; Augustine, Averroes, Anselm, Aquinas
Unit 5 - Enlightenment
Week 11 (30 March-3 April)
lesson 5a) A disenchanted material world; Descartes and dualism; Newton and natural philosophy

Week 12 (6-10 April)
lesson 5b) Changing notions of the place and role of God; coining ‘monotheism’; notions of atheism, deism, theism, and monotheism

Week 13 (13-17 April)
review and exam

Unit 6 - Modernity, postmodernity, and characterizations of god
Week 14 (20-24 April)
lesson 6a) Secularization, Scientific cosmology, and God/gods

Week 15 (April 27-May 1)
lesson 6b) Innumerable Bible-based models; official doctrines; popular portrayals
read: Jacob Neusner, ed. “Religion and Western Civilization in the 21st Century,” Religions Foundations of Western Civilizations (Abington, 2010), part 6; excerpts from Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and other doctrinal statements; excerpts from Jewish, Christian, and Muslim popular sources

Reading period and Exam period (May 5-13)
review and final exam

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