

The Question of God in Modern Culture
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T-Th 3:50- 5:10 pm, Cook/Douglass
Spring 2024

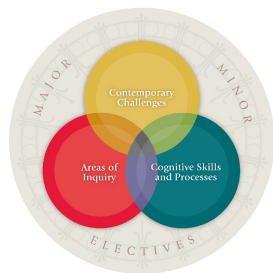
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This course takes an interdisciplinary approach to the question of God in modern culture, using the course title as the springboard for two parallel lines of inquiry: the “question of God” as discussed in philosophy and theology, and religion as it is manifested in “modern culture,” especially popular culture and the news media.

The first track addresses epistemological concerns, focusing on arguments for and against the claim that theism is rationally justifiable, and metaphysical questions about the nature of God and religious experience. We will discuss both classical arguments and more recent responses.

At the same time, the second track situates our study within the broad category of modern culture, especially as manifested in the arenas of entertainment, politics, sports, business, science, technology, and embodiment. We will consider how religiosity has changed, or is changing, in relation to consumerism, technology, economics, shifting demographics, cultural diversity, and globalization. Media representations influence popular beliefs and political ideas about both the cultural identity of God and the spiritual basis upon which national identities are imagined.

This course fulfills the following core curriculum learning goals of Rutgers University:



Philosophical and Theoretical Issues: Arts and Humanities

* Students will examine critically philosophical and other theoretical issues concerning the nature of reality, human experience, knowledge, value, and/or cultural production. **[AHo]**

Social and Historical Analysis

* Students will be able to explain the development of some aspect of a society or culture over time, including the history of ideas or history of science. **[HST]**

The course load (explained in more detail below) involves careful reading of texts, verbal and written participation in class, the writing of 5 short response papers, post-class online quizzes, a movie review, a midterm exam, and gathering and synthesizing a portfolio of news media articles over the course of the semester. You will also be asked to think critically about your own assumptions about God and religion while respecting the plurality of opinions expressed in class.

Required Texts (available through the bookstore and through Canvas)

God, by W. Jay Wood. McGill-Queens University Press. ISBN: 978-0-7735-3840-5 (readily available online through Canvas and the Rutgers library).

Quoting God: How Media Shape Ideas about Religion and Culture, edited by Claire H. Badaracco. Baylor University Press. ISBN: 978-1-932792-06-5 (readily available online through Canvas and the Rutgers library).

The Altars Where We Worship, by Juan Floyd-Thomas, Stacey Floyd-Thomas, and Mark Toulouse. Westminster John Knox Press. ISBN: 978-0-664-23515-4 (readily available online through Canvas and the Rutgers library).

Course Requirements:

1. *Participation* – involves several components/opportunities:

* *Attendance*. Good attendance demonstrates a solid commitment and typically influences your grades on all other aspects of the course. Some of the material covered in lectures and class discussion is not found in the textbooks; additional details may be given in class regarding particular assignments; and exams will draw from both text and class material – so it is vital to be present. If you are sick or have an emergency, it is wise to let me know. Use the University absence reporting website (<https://sims.rutgers.edu/ssra/>) to indicate the date and reason for your absence. An email is automatically sent to me. Please do your best to attend consistently.

You are allowed two absences without a penalty, regardless of the reason. Think of this just like PTO with an employer. There are no such things as “excused” absences that do not count against this allowance, with the exception of religious holidays and documented university events. For absences beyond two, you should submit a paragraph following up on the reading for the class you missed. Your paragraph should include any thoughts/ideas you would have contributed in person, specifically referencing the assigned reading for that day. Send your paragraph via email to me **within one week** of your absence. Failure to follow up in this manner will drop your participation grade one notch (A to A-, e.g.) for each absence beyond the two allowed.

Since we are meeting in person, classes will not be recorded and discussion notes will not be readily available (I do not post slides). You should connect with 1-2 other students in the class who can catch you up in the event that you are unable to attend a session in person, while you in turn can help them if they are unable to attend. Ideally, you will not miss more than two classes. Please do your best to be on time. Arriving late and leaving early are disruptive. Excessive tardiness and/or leaving class early will be tracked and added to your absences.

* *Taking part in class*. This requires completing the assignments before each class, arriving on time (with the assigned text accessible), taking notes, actively listening, and engaging in any class discussion. How and what you learn from listening to a lecture, reading a textbook, doing research, etc., is exponentially enhanced when you have immediate access to other students’ perspectives on the material. Thus, it is equally important and helpful that you share your perspective so that others may benefit from what you have to say.

Participation also includes your performance on occasional “pop” quizzes on the reading material along with the completion of spontaneous written “thought briefs” that may be assigned in class. (Please bring note paper with you to class.) If you are absent for any reason on a day that we have a quiz or brief, you will simply not earn participation credit for that particular assignment.

* *IQ Briefs*. Also included in your participation grade is an IQ Brief for each of the Thursday chapters. For these, you need to zero in on something in the reading you find particularly *Interesting* (I) and something that raises *Questions* for you (Q). These are designed to enable more active reading. They need to be submitted just before class begins and will be used as a basis for our discussion that day, as I may call upon a few students to share elements of their briefs with the class. More details and instructions will be given both in class and on Canvas.

* *News Media Articles*. Finally, participation also involves submitting a news media article on the dates noted on the syllabus (see below). The article should relate in some way to the convergence of religion and culture (both broadly defined) in today’s world – **and should not be an explicit opinion piece**. It must come from one of the following sources: Religion News Service, *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Washington Post*, BBC, NPR, *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, Politico; or one of the following wire services: Associated Press, Reuters, or Bloomberg. The easiest method of finding these kinds of articles is to use the Religion News Service (<https://religionnews.com/>) and/or subscribe to the RNS Morning Report (<https://religionnews.com/subscribe-to-rns-newsletters/>). Ideally, each article will be no more than two weeks old. You should submit a copy of the article, with a clear citation of the source and date, with highlights of the aspects you find most interesting and relevant to our course. (Articles must be submitted by the beginning of the class session to receive full credit.) You should then be prepared to discuss your article with the class (students may be randomly selected). Your articles need not relate to each other, but they may.

Remember that you do not start out with an A grade for participation. You must earn your grade through consistent course involvement. In general, you should think of participation being assessed according to the following standards. In all cases, your contributions should be respectful of others’ thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and values.

- A: You have completed all assigned work before each class session and consistently play an active role in discussions. Your comments reflect excellent preparation and project a commitment to the learning goals of the course. Your contributions reflect a deep and serious engagement with the subject matter. You build upon the comments of others and pose insightful critical questions/comments that advance the level and depth of the conversation. You do well on all pop quizzes and you submit all news articles on time with proper citation. Your IQ Briefs demonstrate serious engagement with the readings.
- B: You have completed your assigned work before most class sessions and often play an active role in discussion. Your comments reflect good preparation and a desire to learn. Your contributions are mostly on target and demonstrate that you are paying attention to the contributions of other students. You submit most news articles and IQ Briefs on time, meeting the given expectations.

- C: Your preparation is inconsistent and you only occasionally engage in discussions. Your comments reflect adequate preparation when you do contribute. Your IQ Briefs are inadequate and/or missing and/or late. You do not submit some of your news articles on time and/or they are not highlighted/annotated.
- D: You are often unprepared and almost never contribute to discussions -and/or- you fail to complete a substantial number of the participation components.
- F: You almost never contribute or participate at all; or your participation disrespects others; or you use electronic devices for purposes other than note-taking.

Use of electronic devices such as cell phones, laptops and tablets must only be for purposes related to the course (i.e., note-taking). Using devices for other purposes is usually obvious and also unacceptable. The burden of proof is on you to demonstrate that you are not using such devices for other purposes. FYI, There is ample research supporting the fact that writing notes in longhand is much more beneficial than typing. Writing notes by hand improves your engagement with and understanding of the material and helps you retain it better.

2. *Response Papers* based on readings in the *Altars* text, due as indicated on the syllabus. These should be **one page maximum**, typed double-spaced in 12-point font (**or smaller**) with 1" margins (**or less**) all around. Do NOT waste space for a heading; you will be submitting the paper via Canvas and as a hard copy; so you can simply begin your text on the first typed line and then hand-write your name at the top of the hard copy. You should fill the page and use multiple paragraphs. These are succinct, analytical responses to the assigned readings for the day in light of what we have been discussing in class. Since these readings deal with popular culture, some of the material will seem dated, so part of your task is to add to the conversation with examples from today's world. For each paper, you should address the following questions (use of first-person voice is fine) in a thoughtful and constructive way:

* What do you think of the authors' overall analysis of this dimension of popular culture? What aspects are most convincing? Is there anything you find problematic?

* What aspects of the discussion resonate for you? What are some personal points of connection?

* Think of your own example of this dimension of popular culture that the authors do not mention but you would include in this chapter. How does it fit and relate specifically to their analysis?

Remember the point of the assignment is to prove that you did the whole reading and thought about it. You must complete **five** (5) total from the six that are assigned, though you should read all of the chapters and be prepared for the in-class discussions. These are graded rather strictly according to the following scale and will be lowered one whole number for each class a paper is turned in late. If not completed within the possible allotted time, the grade will be zero. (Your four highest scores will be used to calculate your final grade for these papers.)

- 10 = (Extraordinary work. Thorough. Effective critical thinking. Rare but possible)
9.5 = (Excellent work – well above and beyond expectations)
9 = (Insightfully completed as expected and written very well)
8.5 = (**This is the typical grade for meeting expectations.**)
8 = (Not quite up to expectations, for one reason or another, and/or writing problems)
7.5 = (Something is lacking or inaccurate; and/or faulty critical thinking)
7 = (Falls short as above and/or too much summary without analysis)
6.5 = (These grades and below are compounding the problems mentioned above.)

(Note: while late written assignments will be penalized as described above, you will be allowed one late paper (one class period) without a penalty. Just be aware that you will have benefitted from the class discussion and this will be taken into account in the assessment of your paper.)

3. *After-class Quizzes*, following the Thursday class sessions. These are designed to help you review the material covered in the Thursday readings and class discussions. They are graded automatically through Canvas and you will be allowed to take each quiz twice. Each quiz must be completed before the next class period. You are responsible for making sure each quiz is submitted and the score is posted.
4. *Midterm Exam*, on Thursday, March 28, mostly on material from the Wood text. This will be taken remotely and require use of the Respondus Lockdown Browser, but not the webcam. Failure to take the test in the allotted time frame (more than our usual class time) without **prior** notification and arrangements will result in a **zero** grade.
5. *Movie Review*, due Tuesday, April 23, on a documentary viewable through Canvas. You will respond to specific question prompts to be posted in Canvas. The paper should be two-pages **minimum**, typed double-spaced in 12-point (no larger) Times New Roman font with 1" margins (or less) all around. Again, do NOT waste space for a heading; you may begin your text on the first typed line. Each paper is graded on the same 10-point scale as the Response Papers and will drop a half-number **for each day** the paper is late.
6. *News Media Portfolios*. (This will function as your final exam and will be due at the scheduled final exam time.) Based on the articles you have gathered throughout the semester, you will write a review essay of the trends and themes you observe across the spectrum of your articles. You will need to link each of the articles to specific issues and problems discussed by the scholars and journalists in the Badaracco text, and make connections to other course material as well. Overall, you should demonstrate how the articles expand your understanding of theories and issues covered throughout the semester, especially with regard to how God questions and religion are represented in the media through these articles. As with all written work in this course, it should be typed, double-spaced, with appropriate fonts and margins. Your review essay should be a minimum of 1200 words, but will likely need to be longer (1500+) in order to meet the requirements of the assignment. More detailed rubrics to come.

Course grades will be based on the following formula:

Participation	20%
Response Papers	20%
After-class Quizzes	10%
Midterm Exam	20%
Movie Review	10%
News Media Portfolio	20%

General Criteria for Evaluation:

- accuracy and precision of scholarship
- clarity of oral and written expression
- progress in critical thinking skills, especially with regard to your own assumptions
- completion of assignments and readings on due dates
- thoroughness, creativity, originality and contribution to field of inquiry

A Note about Grading: A's are supposed to be exceptional grades. In order to earn an A (Outstanding) in this course, you must complete all assignments **really well**. Your work should not only be mostly free of errors, but also above and beyond expectations. Doing all assignments **well** fits more appropriately in the B(+) range of grades ((Very) Good). When work is flawed, late, or incomplete, it fits into the C (Satisfactory) and D (Poor) range.

NOTE: If you have any special needs or a disability that requires any special accommodation to fulfill any course requirements, you need to provide acceptable documentation to the Office of Disability Services. We can then make the appropriate arrangements together.

Be sure to take advantage of the many academic support services Rutgers offers through a variety of Learning Centers. Go to <https://rlc.rutgers.edu/about-us> for more information. If, at any point, you experience anything impacting your performance or ability to participate in this class, please reach out to me. Please also see the academic, health, and mental wellness resources searchable at <https://success.rutgers.edu/> for further support.

Remember that if you EVER consult an outside source for something you are writing, you MUST acknowledge it through an appropriate citation. Portraying someone else's ideas or work as your own is **plagiarism** and any student found plagiarizing will receive an F for the entire course. (<http://academicintegrity.rutgers.edu/academic-integrity-policy/>)

In concert with Rutgers' code of conduct, which mandates "that all work submitted in a course, academic research, or other activity is the student's own and created without the aid of impermissible technologies, materials, or collaborations," the use of AI tools is prohibited.

Consult this syllabus regularly. It contains all the foundational information you need to know. It is also very important that you keep up regularly with all materials on Canvas, especially any announcements I may post from time to time. Please set your notifications appropriately so that you do not miss anything. Consult with the OIT Help Desk (833-648-4357) for Canvas help.

Schedule of Topics, Readings and Assignments:
Readings and papers are DUE on the date for which they are listed.

Jan 16	Course Introduction	
Jan 18	<i>Altars</i> , Introduction	
Jan 23	<i>quoting God</i> : Introduction: Badaracco, "Quotation and the Life of Public Texts," pp. 1-14 and Crumm, "Mocha and Meditation Mats," pp. 247-257	News Article #1
Jan 25	<i>quoting God</i> : Chapter 2: Gaddy, "God Talk in the Public Square" and el-Nawawy, "Law and the Middle East Media: Between Censorship and Independence," pp. 43-66	IQ Brief
Jan 30	<i>Altars</i> , Chapter 1: Body and Sex	Response Paper #1
Feb 1	Wood, Chapter 1: Design Arguments	IQ Brief
Feb 6	<i>quoting God</i> : Chapter 4: Moore, "A Framework for Understanding Fundamentalism" and Flintoff, "Modernity and Fundamentalism in Mongolia," pp. 87-106	News Article #2
Feb 8	Wood, Chapters 2-3: Cosmological Arguments and the Ontological Argument	IQ Brief
Feb 13	<i>Altars</i> , Chapter 2: Big Business	Response Paper #2
Feb 15	Wood, Chapter 4: The Moral Argument for God's Existence	IQ Brief
Feb 20	<i>quoting God</i> : Chapter 7: Gardner, "Collective Memory, National Identity: Victims and Victimizers in Japan" and Watanabe, "Religious Contradiction and the Japanese Soul," pp. 153-179	News Article #3
Feb 22	Wood, Chapter 5: Religious Experience and Cumulative Case Arguments	IQ Brief
Mar 27	<i>Altars</i> , Chapter 3: Entertainment	Response Paper #3
Mar 29	Wood, Chapter 6: Religious Belief without Evidence	IQ Brief

Mar 5	<i>quoting God:</i> Chapter 10: Schaefer, "Reporting Complexity: Science and Religion" and Williams, "Fairness and Pressure Advocacy in Controversial Science," pp. 211-231	News Article #4
Mar 7	Wood, Chapter 7: The Problem of Suffering	IQ Brief
Mar 12, 14	Spring Break (No Class Sessions)	
Mar 19	<i>Altars</i> , Chapter 6: Science and Technology (notice change in chapter order)	Response Paper #4
Mar 21	Wood, Chapter 8: The Nature of God	IQ Brief
Mar 26	<i>quoting God:</i> Chapter 5: Boyer, "Biblical Prophecy and Foreign Policy" and Abdallah, "Post-9/11 Media and Muslim Identity in American Media," pp. 107-128	News Article #5
Mar 28	Midterm Exam (mostly on Wood text)	
Apr 2	<i>Altars</i> , Chapter 5: Sports	Response Paper #5
Apr 4	Cone, "God in Black Theology," from <i>A Black Theology of Liberation</i> (Canvas)	IQ Brief
Apr 9	<i>quoting God:</i> Chapter 3: Moses, "The First Amendment and the Falun Gong" and Smith, "First Amendment and the Common Good," pp. 67-85	News Article #6
Apr 11	Daly, "After the Death of God the Father," from <i>Beyond God the Father</i> (Canvas)	IQ Brief
Apr 16	<i>Altars</i> , Chapter 4: Politics	Response Paper #6
Apr 18	Jones, "Family: Gay Marriage and White Christian America," from <i>The End of White Christian America</i> (Canvas)	IQ Brief
Apr 23	Documentary Film: <i>Hail, Satan?</i> Directed by Penny Lane (Available through Canvas)	Movie Review
Apr 25	Course Conclusion Jones: Afterword (White Christian America and the Trump Presidency) and <i>Altars</i> , Conclusion: Worship without Sacrifice	
May 8	"Take-Home" Final	News Media Portfolio

