

Religion and Culture

PERS 2350, Spring 2010

Professor Michael Stoltzfus

Office: Ashley Hall, Room 112

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Course Description

As part of the core curriculum at VSU, Perspectives courses foster interdisciplinary learning and global awareness. Perspectives courses explore topics that cross disciplinary boundaries with an emphasis on the interaction of two or more disciplines and the development of an ability by the student to synthesize varying points of view.

Perspectives courses attempt to connect issues that affect individuals within our region (a regional perspective) with those affecting individuals in other parts of the world (a global perspective).

Religious meaning is an important factor in the dynamic development and transformation of culture and culture acts with formative agency in the manifestation of religious understanding and motivation. In other words, religion helps to form culture and culture helps to form religion. This course will address three basic questions. What is religion? What is culture? How do religion and culture interact? We will analyze these questions from a broad range of religious and cultural traditions. During the first five weeks of this course we will study the important role that Christianity, Islam and Buddhism have played in the struggle for social justice around the world. The final ten weeks of the course will focus on how a wide diversity of religions (including Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Islam, Judaism, Native American traditions, and Christianity) respond to a variety of practical, real-life dilemmas using the medium of cross-cultural case studies. We will study how distinctive religious and cultural traditions address issues of marriage and family, war and peace, gender roles, criminal justice, child labor, and other important issues from both a regional and a global perspective.

Learning Outcomes

1. Students will think critically about religion and culture.
2. Students will link religion with important issues in cultural transformation.
3. Students will learn basic themes in religious and cultural studies.
4. Students will acknowledge diversity and pluralism in religion and culture.
5. Students will connect issues that affect individuals within our region with those affecting individuals in other parts of the world.

All of the outcomes mentioned above directly relate to departmental educational outcomes 1, 2, 3 & 4 and to VSU general education outcomes 2, 3, 4, 6, 7 & 8.

Departmental Outcomes

1. To encourage an understanding of the world's religious traditions and their influence on values, norms, and public policies.
2. To develop students' critical and analytical skills and their abilities to articulate clearly an attention to multiple religious perspectives.
3. To enable students to challenge their own ideas and to develop self-understanding in the context of diverse ideas that inform contemporary controversies and social conflict.
4. To enable students to engage in independent research, to increase their sense of problem and to communicate their understanding of the issues researched and developed in the context of current theories and research methods in the discipline.

Valdosta State University General Education Outcomes

1. Students will demonstrate understanding of the society of the United States and its ideals.
2. Students will demonstrate cross-cultural perspectives and knowledge of other societies.
3. Students will use computer and information technology when appropriate.
4. Students will express themselves clearly, logically, and precisely in writing and in speaking, and they will demonstrate competence in reading and listening.
5. Students will demonstrate knowledge of scientific and mathematical principles and proficiency in laboratory practices.
6. Students will demonstrate knowledge of diverse cultural heritages in the arts, the humanities, and the social sciences.
7. Students will demonstrate the ability to analyze, to evaluate, and to make inferences from oral, written, and visual materials.
8. Students will demonstrate knowledge of principles of ethics and their employment in the analysis and resolution of moral problems.

Special Services Information: Students requesting classroom accommodations or modifications due to a documented disability must contact the Access Office for Students with Disabilities located in the Farber Hall. The phone numbers are 245-2498 (V/VP) and 219-1348 (TTY).

Cell Phone Policy: Cell phones and other wireless distraction devices should be neither seen nor heard in the classroom setting. If I see or hear a cell phone during official class hours, then I maintain the option of confiscating the phone for a twenty-four hour period. Confiscated phones may be picked up in Ashley Hall room 109 (via departmental secretary) at the appropriate time. Please keep cell phones removed from the classroom.

Texts

1. *Living Faith: How Faith Inspires Social Justice*. Curtiss Deyoung
2. *Ethics and World Religions: Cross-Cultural Case Studies*. Regina Wolfe and Christine Gudorf, eds.

Class Requirements and Grading

1. **Class attendance and participation** (10% of course grade). If you attend all classes and participate in class discussions you will do very well for this portion of your grade. You are allowed one unexcused absence in this course. For each additional unexcused absence two-percentage points will be subtracted from your final grade. You are expected to be punctual, attentive, courteous, and involved.
2. **Pop quizzes** (25% of course grade). Eight or nine times during the semester there will be short quizzes that cover the reading material for that week. These pop quizzes will be given at the beginning of class on random Wednesdays. If you read the assigned material, then these quizzes should not be difficult. **Students who are late to class or absent from class may not make up these quizzes.**
3. **Mid-term take home essay** (25% of course grade). This essay assignment will be handed out on **February 8th and is due on February 17th** at the beginning of class. Late essays will be penalized one letter grade per day.
4. **Weekly journals** beginning in week 7 and going through week 14 (15% of course grade). In each **typed and double-spaced twelve point font** journal entry you are to answer each of the following questions in **three or four sentences**: 1) What are the basic ethical issues being addressed in the case study? 2) What are the major cultural and religious arguments presented in the response you liked best? 3) Imagine yourself in the shoes of those effected by the case study, how would you respond given the context? These will be handed in twice during the semester—the first three on **March 10th** and the last five on **April 28th** when your final essay is due.
5. **Final take home essay** (25% of course grade). This essay assignment will be handed out on March 24th and is due at the beginning of class on **April 28th**. Late essays will be penalized one letter grade per day.
6. **Optional Student Presentations for Extra Credit**: During the last several weeks of class students will have the option of giving brief oral presentations to the class for extra-credit. The content of the presentations will coordinate with the material in your final essay assignment.

The grading scale is as follows: 90% to 100% = A; 80% to 89% = B; 70% to 79% = C; 60% to 69% = D; 59% and below = F

Course Schedule

- Week 1. Introduction to Course: Faith and Social Justice
Read: Deyoung, pp. 1-23.
- Week 2. Bonhoeffer: Christian Complicity and Resistance
Read: Deyoung, pp. 25-61.
- Week 3. Malcolm X: Islamic Transformation and Resistance
Read: Deyoung, pp. 63-87
PBS Video: *Malcolm X: Make It Plain*
- Week 4. Malcolm X and Martin Luther King: Comparative Analysis
Read: Deyoung, pp. 88-120.

Week 5. Buddhism, Nonviolence, and Reconciliation

Read: Deyoung, pp. 121-149.

Hand out mid-term essay assignment

Week 6. "Sex and the Single Person"

Read: Wolfe, 42-63.

Mid-term essay is due

Week 7: "A Bundle of Joy"

Read: Wolfe, 172-194.

Week 8: "A Spectrum of Violence"

Read: Wolfe, 108-123.

Week 9: "Parental Rights in the Age of Aids"

Read: Wolfe, 375-399.

Week 10: "A Long Awaited Call"

Read: Wolfe, 260-278.

Week 11. "Children: Parental Right or Gift from God"

Read: Wolfe, 321-338.

Week 12. "For the Good of the Children"

Read: Wolfe, 298-317.

Week 13. "An issue of Murder?"

Read: Wolfe, 356-374.

Hand out final essay assignment

Week 14. "A Conflict of Interest"

Read: Wolfe, 239-259.

Week 15. Optional Student Presentations for Extra-Credit

No Reading Assignment.

Final essay and reflections are due.