COURSE DESCRIPTION
This course introduces the student to the academic study of religion through an examination of a particular theme in selected religious traditions. In this class, we focus on the topic messiahs and messiah-like figures (and their movements) in four traditions: Biblical tradition (ancient Israel), Judaism (from the 2nd Temple Period to the present), Islam (the 12th Imam and Mahdi), and Buddhism (the future Buddha Maitreya). Our examination will draw principally upon primary textual sources, along with some supplementary readings and videos. The approach will be for the most part historical and increasingly comparative as the course progresses. Through comparison, the student will discern larger themes and patterns in why and how these movements portray (and respond to) their respective “messianic” figures, as well as how scholars across disciplines have appealed to various theories to explain the phenomenon of “failed prophecy.” In addition, the messiah theme provides an entry into many of the central ideas of each tradition; in this manner, the student should acquire some understanding of the basic tenets of each tradition, as well as an appreciation for their respective adherents.

GENERAL EDUCATION STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES
In dealing with messiahs and their movements, the course addresses the following two GenEd learning outcomes: (1) Students analyze how ideas are represented, interpreted, or valued in various expressions of human culture; and (2) Students examine relevant primary source materials as understood by the discipline and interpret that material in writing assignments. These outcomes will be assessed by means of a Passage Analysis Assignment involving a reading(s) not covered on the syllabus.

DEPARTMENTAL STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES
1) Students should recognize and be able to explain the major theoretical perspectives and key issues of debate in the academic study of religion.
2) Students understand, interpret, and contextualize primary texts from one or more religious traditions.
3) Students will demonstrate effective writing skills with the ability to craft an argument in defense of a coherent thesis statement using and analyzing supporting evidence from primary and secondary sources.

REQUIRED TEXTS
All readings for the course are available on Oaks (via MyCharleston). Your enrollment in the class automatically provides electronic access.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS
1) Three Examinations (20% each). These consist of multiple choice, passage identification, and essay. It is imperative that the student notify me in advance if he or she is unable to take an exam. You should call me at my office; if I do not pick up, leave a message explaining the reason for your absence. Make-up exams may cover different material than the exam taken in class and will be given only to those students who provide what I deem to be a valid excuse for their absence.
2) Take-home final (20%). Toward the end of the term, I will distribute a take-home final exam, containing a number of essay questions (from which you will be required to answer two or three). These questions potentially may cover any topic discussed throughout the term. In addition, the exam will include a question dealing with the theoretical analyses of Zygmunt and Gordon Melton (see Oaks #49 and 50). Exams are due in my office no later than December 12.

3) Passage Analysis Assignment (5%). Identification and analysis of a passage or text not covered in the syllabus or in class.

4) Attendance/Participation and Quizzes (15%). It is expected that each student will come to class prepared (having done the readings), motivated, and eager to participate. I will give weekly quizzes over the readings (announced beforehand and given at the start of class), and an occasional writing assignment. I drop the two lowest quiz grades, so if you miss a quiz or two, you need not provide an excuse or ask for a make-up. If you miss class, it is your responsibility to obtain information on any written assignment and turn it in on time (so make friends in class!). Laptops are permitted in class for access to Oaks readings or taking notes, but not for updating your Facebook status, chatting, surfing Reddit, or other sundry online activity, for which I have no patience. If I suspect the latter, I will ask you to close your computer. If this happens more than once, your laptop privileges will be revoked for the duration of the course. Also, smart phone use (texting etc.) is strictly prohibited. If I see you continually staring at your crotch and smiling, I will assume you have a phone (if not, I don’t want to know).

5) Honor Code Policy. Please read this sheet carefully, sign/date it, and return it to me in class no later than September 1.

GRADING
Letter grades are determined in accordance with the following scale:

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COURSE SCHEDULE AND READING ASSIGNMENTS

I. Introduction: Defining Religion and Academic Approaches to its Study
(August 25 - Sept. 3)

Arnal, “Definition” (Oaks #1)
Nye, “Religion: Some Basics” (Oaks #2)
McCutcheon, “Studying Religion” (Oaks #3) - from the Dept. of Religious Studies, University of Alabama - http://rel.as.ua.edu/studyingreligion.html
(Refer to this site for definition of terms/concepts and brief biographies of important figures in the history of the study of religion.)
II. Messiahs and Traditional Messianic Texts in the Hebrew Bible (Sept. 8-17)

A. The Biblical Foundation: King-Messiah in the Hebrew Bible

Readings: De Jonge, “Messiah” (Oaks #5)

Biblical texts (Oaks #6a-c)
-!1 Samuel 8:1-11; 16:1-14 (for other coronation rituals, compare 1 Kings 19:15-16; 2 Kings 9:1-8 and 11:12)
-!2 Samuel, chap. 7-8 (for sonship theme, see Psalm 2)
-!Exodus 30:22-33 and 40:1-15 (also Exodus 29:1-9, 29-30 and anointing simile in Psalm 133)
-!Psalms 89, 132
-!Isaiah, chaps. 7-8, 9 and 11
-!Micah, chaps. 4-5
-!Jeremiah 23:1-8; 33:14-26
-!Isaiah 44:24--45:19
-!Haggai (all)
-!Zechariah 3-6
-!Daniel 7

FIRST EXAM (on Introduction/Hebrew Bible) - Sept. 22

III. Messiahs and Messianic Movements in Jewish Tradition (Sept. 24–Oct. 15)
(No classes on Oct. 20; Fall Break)

A. “Judaisms” and their Messiahs during the Second Temple Period: Testament Literature and the Dead Sea Scrolls

Readings: Nickelsburg/Stone, “The Agents of Divine Deliverance” (Oaks #7)

Vermes, “Future Expectations in the Community of the Covenant” (8a)

Selections from the Dead Sea scrolls (#8b)

B. Royal Pretenders and “Messianic” Movements in the Second Temple Period (adding Bar Kokhba)

Readings: Horsley, “Royal Pretenders and Popular Messianic Movements” (#9a-b)

Marks, “Freedom Fighter, Reckless Thug, and Hero-Saint” and “Bar Kokhba in Rabbinic Literature” (#10)

“Conclusion” and “Appendix” (#11)

C. Two Contrasting Medieval Views
Readings: Reeves, “Signs of the Messiah” (#12; text starts on p. 121)
Maimonides on the Messiah (from Mishneh Torah) (#13)

D. Shabbatai Sevi, the Mystical Messiah
Readings: Halperin, “Introduction” (to life of Sevi) (#14)
Scholem, Sabbatai Sevi, The Mystical Messiah
(selections) (#15)
Two 17th century accounts of Sevi’s Life (#16a-b)

E. Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the Brooklyn Messiah
Readings: Dein, “Lubavitchers, Hasidism, and the Rebbe” (#17)
“ “The Death of the Rebbe” (#18)
“ “The Convert’s Zeal” (#19)
“ Lubavitch Messianism and Early Christianity (#20)
Berger, “The Spectre of Idolatry” (#21)
Heilman, “On Writing about the Seventh Lubavitch Rebbe
and his Hasidim” (#22)

For reviews and other material relating to the controversial 2010 biography
of Schneerson (by Heilman and Friedman), see the authors’ website:
http://soc.qc.cuny.edu/faculty/heilman/books/rebbe/

For Chabad’s presentation of Schneerson, with videos etc., see:
http://www.chabad.org/therebbe/article_cdo/aid/60771/jewish/Life.htm

SECOND EXAM (on Jewish Tradition) - Oct. 22

IV. Messiahs, Mahdis, and Messianism in Islamic Tradition (Oct. 27 - Nov. 12)

A. The Life of Muhammad and Early Islam
“ “Muhammad and the Believers’ Movement” (#24)
Ibn Ishaq on the life of Muhammad (selections) (#25)
Momem, “The Question of the Succession to Muhammad” and
“The Lives of the Imams...” (#26)

B. The Office of Imam; Al-Mahdi/12th Imam in Twelver Shi’ism
Readings: Momem, “The Imamate” (#27)
“ “The Twelfth Imam, His Occultation and
Return” (#28)

C. Classical Traditions about the Mahdi, Jesus, and Anti-Christ Figures
Readings: Aghaie, “Messianism in the Muslim Tradition” (survey) (#29)
Ibn Khaldun on the Mahdi (#30)
Cook, “Metahistorical Apocalypses” (#31)

D. Sayyid Muhammad Nurbakhsh, a 15th Century Sufi Mahdi
Readings: Bashir, “Articulating the Messianic Message” (#32)

E. The Mahdi, Afghanistan, and the Anti-Christ in Modern Muslim Apocalyptic Literature
Readings: Cook, “The Mahdi and World Conquest” (#33)
“Apocalyptic Predictions concerning Afghanistan and the Taliban” (#34)
“The Figure of the Antichrist” (#35)
Amanat, “Messianic Aspirations in Contemporary Iran” (#36)

Iranian Film on the Mahdi: “The Coming is Upon Us”:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vcLS724zM7A

THIRD EXAM (on Islamic Tradition) - November 17

V. Messiah-Like Figures in Buddhist Tradition (Nov. 19 - Dec. 3)

A. The Life of the Historical Buddha and his Enlightenment
Readings:
   Strong, “Introduction: The Lifestory of the Buddha” (#37)
   “Deeds of the Buddha” (Buddhacarita) (#38)

B. Bodhisattvas, Buddhas and the Buddhist Cosmos
Readings:
   Robinson/Johnson, “The Bodhisattva Path” (#39)
   Lopez, “The Bodhisattva Vow” (#40)
   Strong, “The Previous Lives of the Buddha” (#41)
   Strong, “Remembering Past Lives” (#42)
   Nattier, “A Prophecy of the Death of the Dharma” (#43)

C. Maitreya/Metteyya, the Future Buddha
Readings:
   “The Chronicle of the Future Buddha” (#44)
   “Aspirations to Meet Buddha Ariya Metteyya” (#45)
   Lopez, “Maitreya Describes the Future” (#46)
   Nattier, “The Meanings of the Maitreya Myth” (#47)
D. Coming Full Circle with the Wheel of Time: Buddhism Gets Political
Reading:
Newman, “Eschatology in the Wheel of Time Tantra” (#48)

**December 12 (Saturday) - Take-home final due in my office no later than 2:00pm**