

RELS 101.01 - APPROACHES TO RELIGION
COLLEGE OF CHARLESTON
Spring 2018
“Messiahs and Messianic Movements”

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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). *(Please note that we are not dealing with Christian tradition in this course, although our discussion of Jewish messianic expectation in the Second Temple period provides crucial historical and religious contexts for its emergence.)* 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 millennial movements (e.g., messianic figures who do not appear or who do not fulfil traditional expectations) 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.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

1) *Four Examinations (first two exams are 15% each; last two are 20% each).* The first three consist of multiple choice, passage identification, and one essay. The last exam will be a take-home essay (see below) and will be due on the scheduled final exam date (May 1). It is imperative that the student notify me in advance if he or she is unable to take any of the exams. You should call me at my office; if I do not pick up, leave a detailed 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 Essay (10%).* To satisfy the Student Learning Outcomes requirement, students will write an essay in response to a question dealing with comparative aspects of the course.

3) *Quizzes (12%).* 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!). Please do not ask me via e-mail to update you on what has happened in class.

Attendance/Participation (8%). You are permitted a total of **THREE** free absences over the course of the

term; that is, you need not provide documentation for these. I strongly suggest you save these absences for illnesses or emergencies. Each absence *past the allowed three will result in a 5 point deduction* in your final grade for the course; 8 or more absences results in an automatic withdrawal.

REQUIRED TEXTS

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

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 humanities area under study and interpret that material in writing assignments. These outcomes will be assessed by means of a take-home essay assignment (see below).

DISABILITY ACCOMMODATION

If you have a documented disability and have been approved to receive accommodations through the Center for Disability Services/SNAP (Students Needing Access Parity), please come and discuss this with me as soon as possible during my office hours (or by appointment). Students approved for accommodations are responsible for notifying me at least one week before accommodation is needed.

ACADEMIC SUPPORT SERVICES: The Center for Student Learning

The CSL, located on the first floor of the library, offers a wide variety of tutoring and other academic resources that support many courses offered at the College. Services include walk-in tutoring, by appointment tutoring, study strategies appointments, Peer Academic Coaching (PAC), and Supplemental Instruction (SI). All services are described on the CSL website (<http://csl.cofc.edu>) or call 843.953.5635 for information.

GRADING

Letter grades are determined in accordance with the following scale:

100-94 A	75-73 C
93-90 A-	72-70 C-
89-86 B+	69-66 D+
85-83 B	65-62 D
82-80 B-	61-59 D-
79-76 C+	58- F

TECHNOLOGY POLICY

Use of laptops or other electronic equipment is not permitted in the classroom. You are required to print out and have in hand the relevant assigned reading(s) from Oaks for each class. I will announce beforehand (in class or via email) what readings will be discussed in class (and at times provide discussion questions). Smart phone use (texting, etc.) is strictly prohibited; all phones should be set on silent (not vibrate) or turned off and *not on your desk*. 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).

HONOR CODE POLICY

Please read this sheet carefully, sign/date it, and return it to me in class no later than January 18.

COURSE SCHEDULE AND READING ASSIGNMENTS

This schedule is subject to revision. Please bring all relevant materials to class!

I. Introduction: Defining Religion and Academic Approaches to its Study (January 9-18)

Nye, "Religion: Some Basics" (Oaks #1)

Arnal, "Definition" (Oaks #2)

McCutcheon, "Studying Religion" (Oaks #3) - from the Department 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.)

Cabezón, "Identity and the Work of the Scholar of Religion" (#4)

Bullard, "The World's Newest Major Religion: No Religion" - online at:
<https://news.nationalgeographic.com/2016/04/160422-atheism-agnostic-secular-nones-rising-religion/>

Stausberg, "Can I be spiritual but not religious?" and King, "Can one study one's own religion objectively?" (#4a)

II. Messiahs and Traditional Messianic Texts in the Hebrew Bible (Jan. 23 – Feb. 1)

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

Readings: De Jonge, "Messiah" (Oaks #5)

Biblical texts (Oaks #6a-c)

1 Samuel 8-11; 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 (see also Psalm 2 for sonship theme)
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

FIRST EXAM (on Introduction and Hebrew Bible) - February 6

III. Messiahs and Messianic Movements in Jewish Tradition (Feb. 8-27)

- 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)
Sarid, “Bar Kokhba’s Legacy of Lies” (#11a)
- 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 Lubavitcher 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://therebbebook.qcsociology.org/>

For Chabad’s presentation of Schneerson, with videos etc., see:

SECOND EXAM (on Jewish Tradition) - March 1

IV. Messiah, Mahdi, and Messianism in Islamic Tradition (March 6-29)

A. The Life of Muhammad and Early Islam

Readings: Donner, “The Near East on the Eve of Islam” (#23)

“ “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)

****March 20-22: Spring Break****

D. Sayyid Muhammad Nurbakhsh, a 15th Century Mystical 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)

“The Signs of Coming of Imam Al-Mahdi” (2015):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-HJ8yO71I6M>

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

THIRD EXAM (on Islamic Tradition) - April 3

V. Messiah-Like Figures in Buddhist Tradition (April 5-19)

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. Bodhisattavas, 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)

C. Maitreya/Metteyya, the Future Buddha

Readings:

"The Chronicle of the Future Buddha" (#43)

"Aspirations to Meet Buddha Ariya Metteyya" (#44)

Lopez, "Maitreya Describes the Future" (#45)

Nattier, "The Meanings of the Maitreya Myth" (#46)

D. Buddhism Gets Political (and Violent)

Readings:

Nattier, "A Prophecy of the Death of the Dharma" (#47)

Newman, "Eschatology in the Wheel of Time Tantra" (#48)

Jerryson, "Monks with Guns" (48a)

****Take-Home Essay May 1 (Tuesday)****