

RELS 101.03 - APPROACHES TO RELIGION
COLLEGE OF CHARLESTON
Fall 2022 - MW 4:00-4:15

“Messiahs and Messianic Movements in Comparative Perspective”

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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 exams (bluebook, in class) 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 (**December 10**). It is imperative that you notify me in advance if you are unable to take an exam. 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 will be given only to those students who provide what I deem to be a valid, preferably written, 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. These essays are due **December 8**.

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. Barring

exceptional circumstances, there are no make-up quizzes. 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!).

4) *Attendance/Participation (8%)*. Given this is not a hybrid course, nor an online class, in-person attendance is essential. You are permitted a total of **THREE** absences, for whatever reason, over the course of the term (you need not provide any type of excuse for these). Any number greater than this will result in a lowered or failing final grade. Barring exceptional circumstances, **EIGHT** or more absences will result in failure of the course. Exceptions (beyond the three absences) are made for those who contract Covid and must isolate or if you are dealing with other serious circumstances (e.g., family or medical issues). If you miss class, it is *your responsibility* to obtain notes or information on material covered that day(s). I will be happy to speak or meet with you at any time (during office hours or by appointment) to discuss what we covered in class and summarize the salient points of lecture and/readings. As for reading assignments and participation in class, **I will assume that you have read the relevant materials before coming to class and can discuss them.**

REQUIRED TEXTS

All readings for the course are available on Oaks (via your MyPortal). Your enrollment in the class automatically provides access. Once in the Oaks page for this class, click on Content for course materials.

ELECTRONICS (NOT) IN THE CLASSROOM

Use of laptops, tablets, phones, and other electronic equipment is prohibited in the classroom. Exceptions are permitted only if you present a valid written reason for access to a laptop, iPad, or Tablet during class; please come and speak to me about your situation (not via email). I will announce beforehand (in class and in a follow-up email) what readings will be discussed in the following class(es). **Smart phone use is strictly prohibited; all phones should be set on silent (not vibrate) or turned off, and completely out of view (not on your desk, seat, or within view in your book bag where the cunning cyber Satan can tempt you)**. If I observe you in violation of this policy in class, I will ask you to put away your phone or close your laptop. In addition, such actions, if repeated, will adversely affect your attendance/participation grade for the class. If you are dealing with a family matter or other urgent situation where you need to check your phone during class, please inform me of this beforehand.

OFFICE HOURS AND COMMUNICATION

During my posted office hours above, I will be available to chat in my office or to talk via phone or Zoom. If you have a logistical question about the course (e.g., When is this assignment due? or where can I find that reading?), you should first consult the syllabus, class emails, or Oaks before asking me. Email is my preferred means of communication, so make sure you check yours daily. Please include "RELS 101 " and your name in the subject line of any email you send to me (please do not send an email with no subject; chances are I will probably ignore it). I try to respond to emails within 24 hours on weekdays. I usually do check email on weekends, but may take longer to reply, depending on the nature of your question or concern. Also, if you have the time, you may speak with me briefly after class.

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 no. 2 above).

Honor Code and Academic Integrity. Lying, cheating, attempted cheating, and plagiarism are violations of our Honor Code, which, when suspected, are investigated. This applies also to unauthorized collaboration (working together without permission), which is a form of cheating. Unless the instructor specifies that students can work together on an assignment (which I will not do in this class), no collaboration is permitted. Other forms of cheating include possessing or using an unauthorized study aid (e.g., accessing a phone in the classroom), copying from others' exams, or giving unauthorized assistance. Each incident will be examined to determine the degree of deception involved. Incidents where the student's actions appear to be due more to misunderstanding or confusion (Class 3 violation) will be handled by me as the instructor. Cases of suspected academic dishonesty (Class 1 or 2 violations) will be reported to the Dean of Students. If the Honor Board determines that you have violated the code, you will receive a grade of XXF in the course, indicating failure of the course due to academic dishonesty. This XX sanction will appear on your transcript for up to two years, after which time you may petition for it to be removed. The grade of F is permanent. If you are unfamiliar with the Honor Code or what plagiarism is, see the Student handbook at: <http://deanofstudents.cofc.edu/honor-system/studenthandbook/index.php>

Academic Support Services: The Center for Student Learning. I encourage you to utilize the academic support services offered by the Center for Student Learning (CSL) and the Writing Lab for assistance in study strategies and essay writing consultation. The Center offers a wide variety of tutoring and other academic resources that support many courses offered at the College (including walk-in or by appointment tutoring, study strategies appointments, Peer Academic Coaching, and Supplemental Instruction). Students of all abilities have become more successful using these programs throughout their academic careers and the services are available to you at no cost. For more information on the Center and its many services, go to the CSL website (<http://csl.cofc.edu>), or call 843.953.5635.

Universal Learning and Center for Disability Services/SNAP. I am committed to the principle of universal learning. This means that our classroom, our virtual spaces, our practices and our interactions should be as inclusive as possible. Mutual respect, civility, and the ability to listen carefully are crucial to universal learning. If you are eligible for and require any type of accommodation because of a documented disability, please speak with me during the first two weeks of class so that reasonable accommodations can be made. You are responsible for notifying me at least one week before accommodation is needed, and must provide any relevant documentation. For more information, see: <http://disabilityservices.cofc.edu> or call 843.953.1431.

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

Religious Observances and Accommodation. The College of Charleston community is enriched by students of many faiths with various religious observances, practices, and beliefs. Religious observances will be accommodated. If you need to be absent for any given class for a specific observance, please notify me by the end of the second week of class.

COURSE SCHEDULE AND READING ASSIGNMENTS

This schedule is subject to revision (because shit happens). Please bring all relevant materials to class!

August 24 – September 5

I. Introduction: Defining Religion and Academic Approaches to its Study

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" (Oaks #4)

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

Bullard, "The World's Newest Major Religion: No Religion" - online at:

<https://news.nationalgeographic.com/2016/04/160422-atheism-agnostic-secular-nones-rising-religion/> (#4b)

September 7-19

II. Messiahs and Traditional Messianic Texts in the Hebrew Bible

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

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

Biblical texts (Oaks #6a-c)

1 Samuel 8--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) - September 21****

September 26 – October 17

III. Messiahs and Messianic Movements in Jewish Tradition

- 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:
https://www.chabad.org/therebbe/article_cdo/aid/2608069/jewish/Biography.htm

****SECOND EXAM (on Jewish Tradition) - October 19****

October 24–November 14

IV. Messiah, Mahdi, and Messianism in Islamic Tradition

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)

****FALL BREAK - November 7****

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)

****THIRD EXAM (on Islamic Tradition) - November 16****

November 21 – December 5

V. Messiah-Like Figures in Buddhist Tradition

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)

Keown, "Karma and Rebirth" (#38a)

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)

****November 23-27: Happy Thanksgiving!****

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, Even Violent(!)

Readings:

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

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

****SLO Assignment due December 8 (in my office or mailbox)****

****Take-Home Final Exam Essay - Due December 10 (see exam handout for details)****