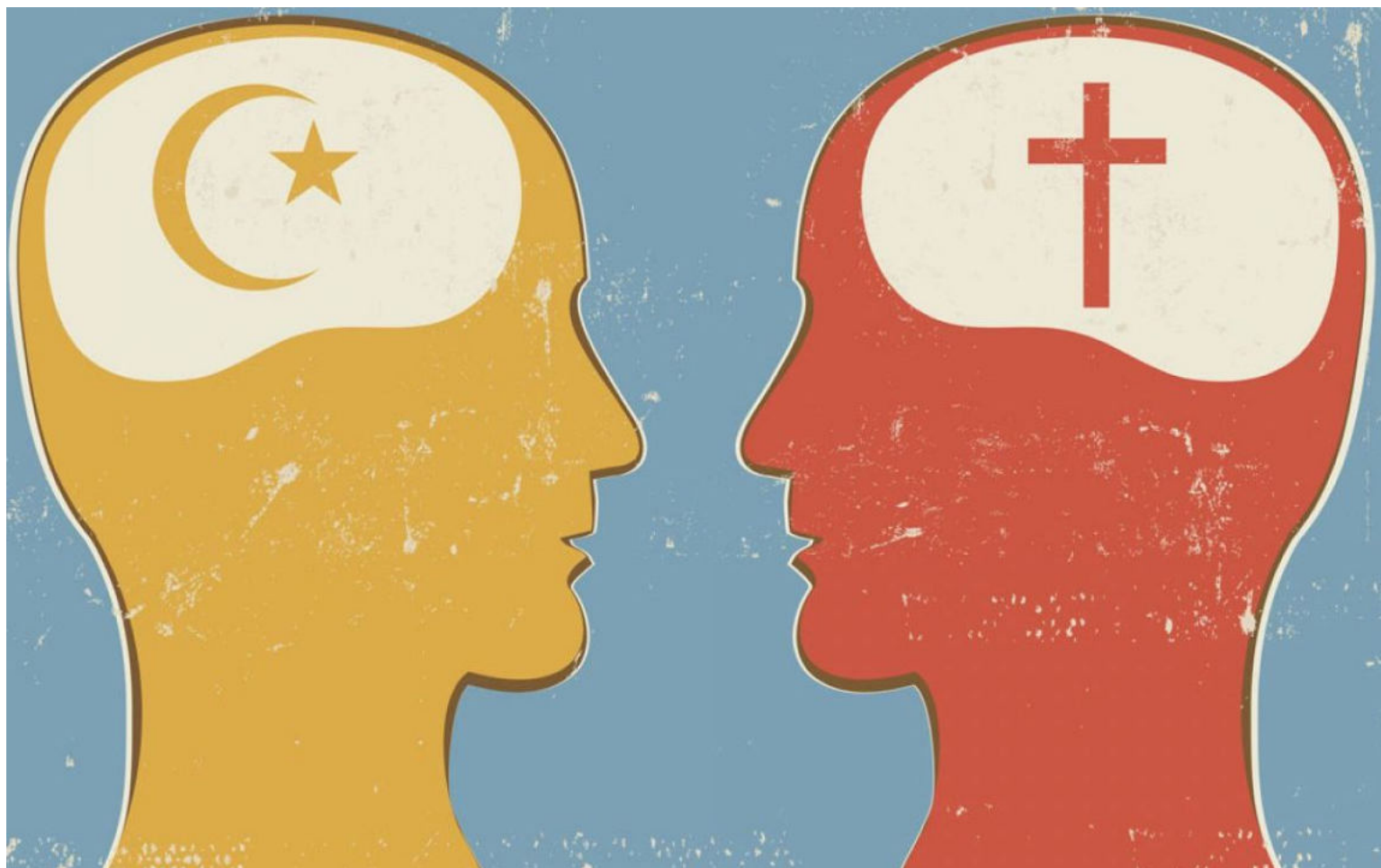




Islamic and Christian Perspectives on Faith, Reason, & Imagination

dr axel oaks takacs

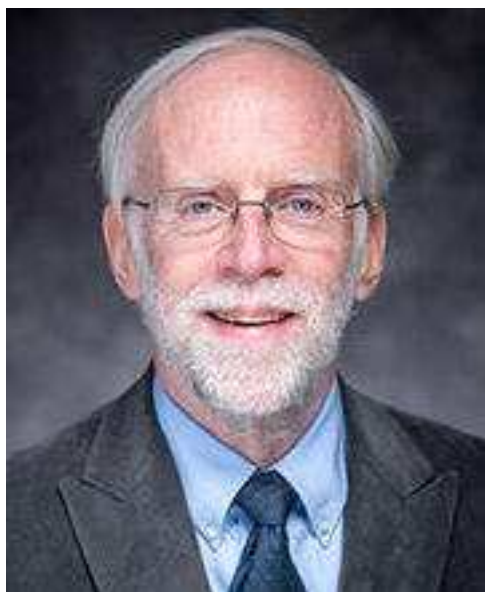
This course explores Islamic and Christian perspectives on faith, reason, and the imagination through a comparative theological lens. Theological themes in comparison includes the nature of God (Trinity, the Divine Names), scripture and revelation, prophethood, the functions and roles of Jesus and Mary, spirituality/mystical theology, affective approaches to God (love and desire), poetry, salvation and liberation, and the meaning of suffering. We will also explore the role of experience, history, the sciences, epistemologies, and community in religious reflection, the prospects for a common morality (i.e., revealed knowledge and natural knowledge), and the shape and significance of sin, grace, revelation, free will, and imagination.

The intelligence and proficiency required to teach the content of this course would not be possible without my mentors--too many to list.

For this class in particular, I have been shaped by my teachers in Islamic Studies, Christian Theology, and Comparative Theology.

—

May we honor them in the classroom as we continue to learn, grow, and flourish together in pursuit of truth, beauty, liberation, and justice.



Francis X. Clooney, S.J.

Parkman Professor of
Divinity and Comparative
Theology, Harvard Divinity
School



Khaled El-Rouayheb

James Richard Jewett
Professor of Islamic
Intellectual History, Harvard
University



Charles M. Stang

Professor of Early Christian
Thought, Harvard Divinity
School



**Boyd Taylor
Coolman**

Professor of Theology,
Boston College

James W. Morris

Professor of Islamic
Studies, Boston
College (retired)



about this land

Seton Hall University is located on Lenapehoking, the ancestral lands of the Lenni Lenape indigenous peoples of Turtle Island (also known as North America).

May we honor them and all native peoples by restoring equitable relationships among all peoples and their sacred land.

about this instructor

axel marc oaks takacs (he/him) is a scholar of classical and post-classical islamic studies and catholic comparative theology.

theo-poetics, imagination, poetry, incarnation, prophetic theology, school of love, mysticism, interreligious studies, racism, capitalism, islamophobia, interreligious co-resistance, revelation, decolonialism, indigenous knowledges



An illustration from *The Libro de los Juegos* (13th century CE) that shows a game of chess between a Muslim and a Christian.

(Monasterio de El Escorial, Spain)

Where can you find the instructor?

email: takacsax@shu.edu

Office Hours (Fahy 324)

**Mondays and Wednesdays from 12:45-1:45,
Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays by appt.**

COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY

This class engages theology—Islamic, Christian, and Comparative—to make meaning, find value, and discover Truth in the experience of being human in a religiously diverse world. It explores theological themes in comparison to illuminate one's own faith.

FAITH

The class is premised on faith seeking understanding, critical reflection on praxis in the light of faith, and faith as the human response to God

IMAGINATION

We exercise the imagination to enter into the ways in which Muslim and Christian communities have related to God, self, and others.

REASON

Reason and logic are employed in conjunction with revealed truth, diverse experiences of being human, and the rich, complex traditions of Islam and Christianity



Literacy, Intelligence, and Proficiency

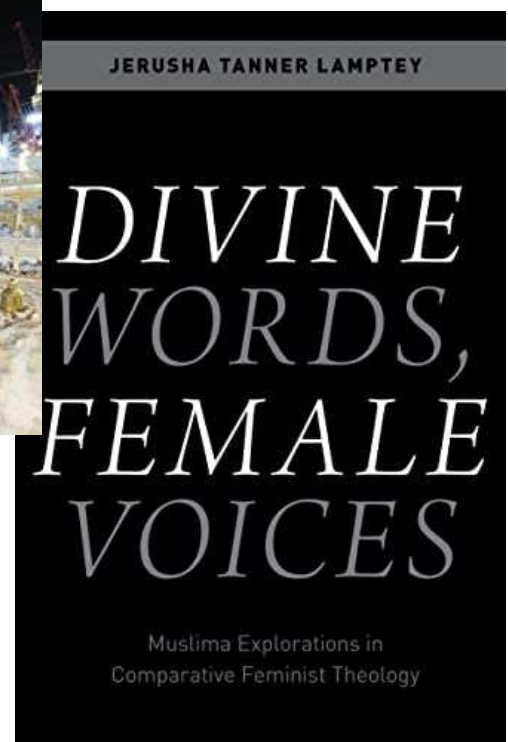
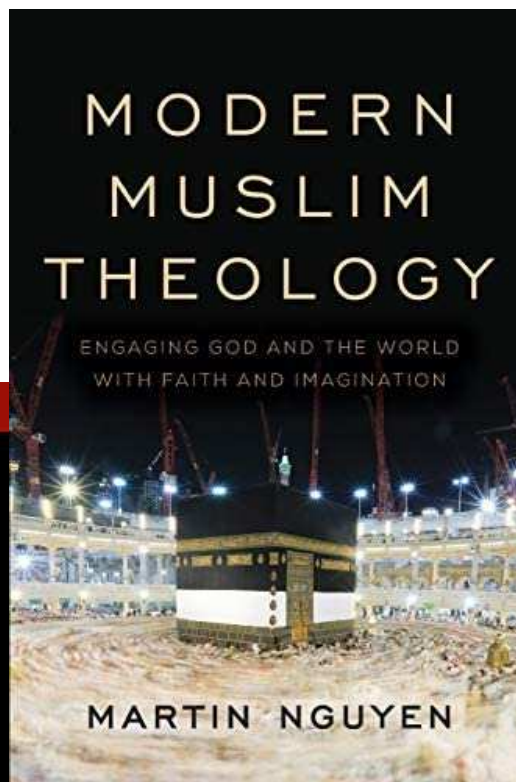
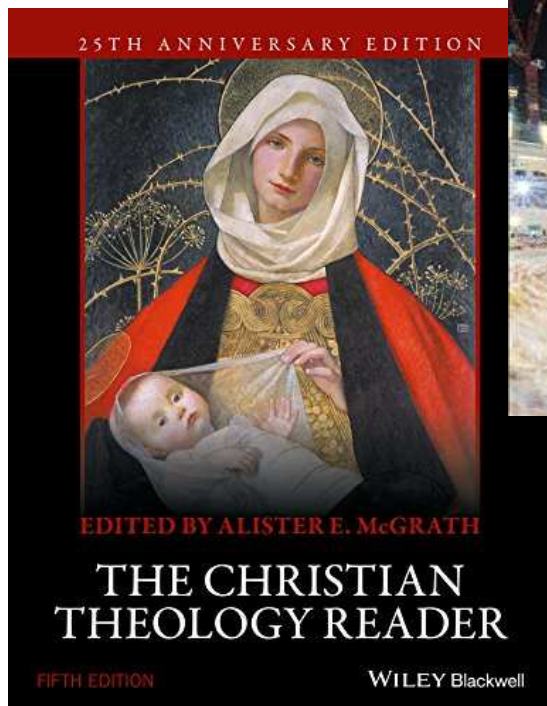
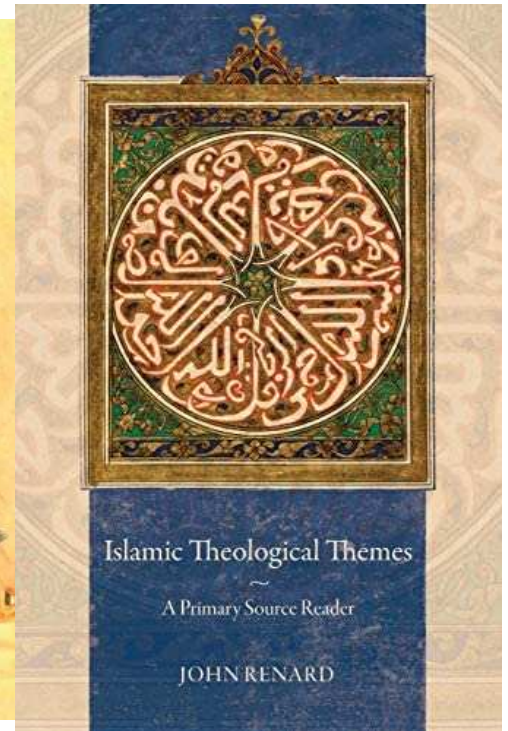
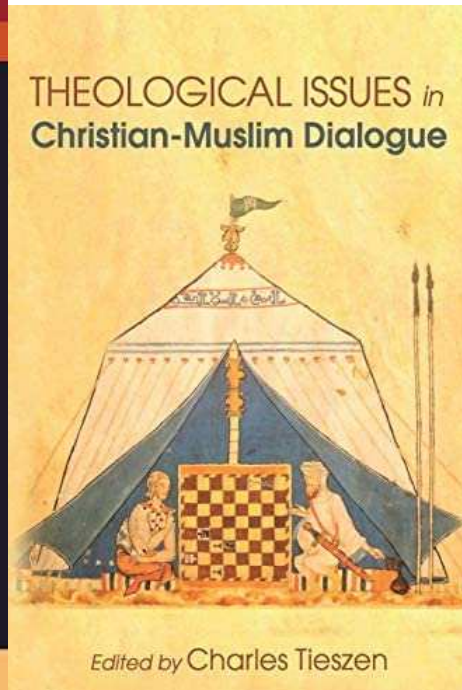
This class cultivates interreligious literacy, intelligence, and proficiency (see Christine Hong, *Decolonial Futures* [2021])

Interreligious Literacy provides students with the basic building blocks for understanding inter- and intra-religious **diversity**. It enables us to identify and explain various religious and interreligious histories, contexts, traditions, theologies, practices, ethics, and values. It **comprehends the present in light of the past**.

Interreligious intelligence is the intellectual, social, and imaginative capacity to apply interreligious literacy to various contexts in one's future. It enables us to employ interreligious knowledge in making judgments about the best course of action in any given diverse context. It is not neutral but grounded in **justice-oriented critical thinking** that seeks to construct a world in which religious pluralism and diversity is affirmed. It **imagines a future yet unknown**.

Interreligious proficiency is the practice of executing those judgments in the real world. Students develop **habits of mind, inquiry, and action** that shape how they relate to self and others in the context of a religiously diverse world. It is the **embodied practice** of interreligious intelligence and **constructs a future to be known**.

What are we reading?



What are we doing?

- Attendance and class participation (15%)
- Religious/Ethical/Spiritual Autobiography (15%)
- Treatise on Love (15%)
- Thesis-Driven, Comparative Essay (20%)
- Creative Response (15%)
- Final: Group Oral Exam (20%)



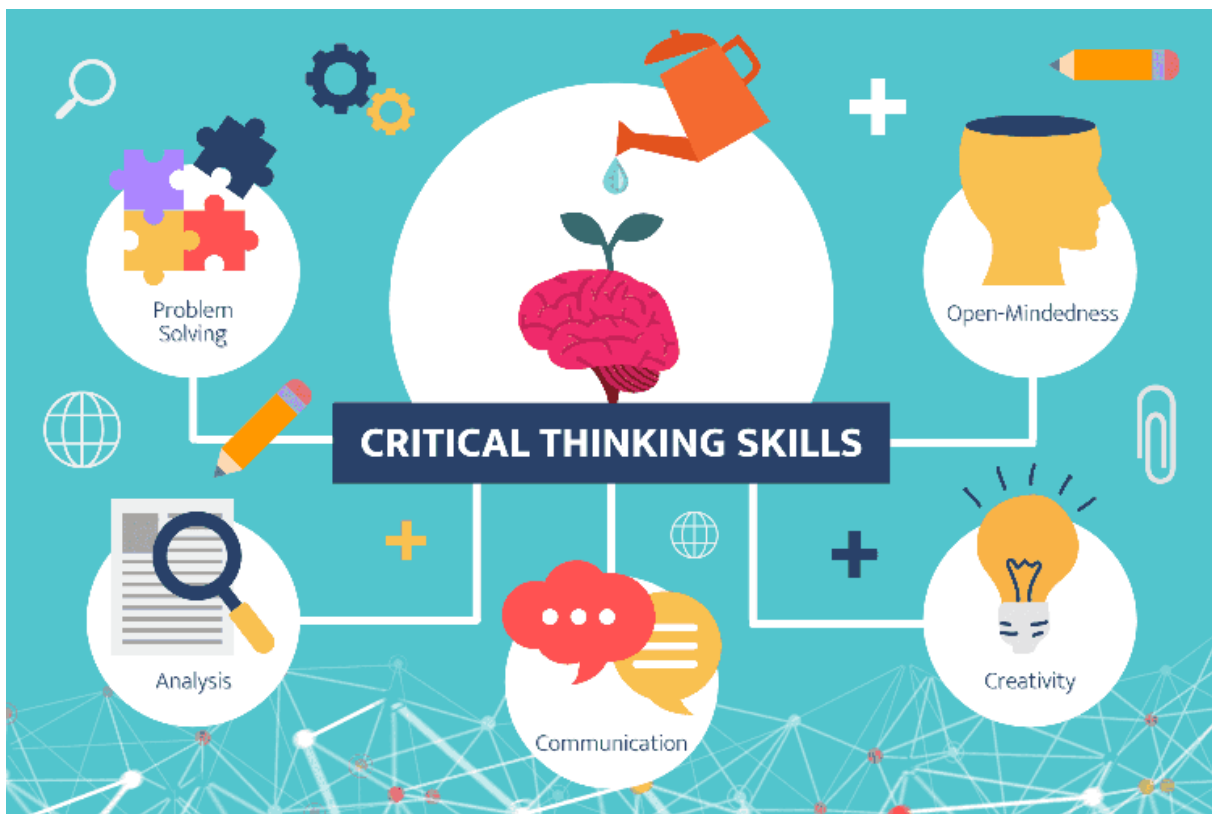
Saint Augustine painting by Antonio Rodríguez (17th c.)

What are the goals?

- to express the core beliefs, historical contexts, and theological issues that constitute both the Islamic and Christian religious traditions
- to recognize and explain Islamic and Christian theological themes in comparison, including the existence and essence/nature of God, theology of creation, theological anthropology, theological ethics, theology of revelation, the role of reason in faith, mystical theology, imagination, the meaning of suffering, and liberation theology
- to analyze the theological differences and commonalities between Christian traditions and Islamic traditions;
- to comprehend methods and goals in comparative theology and to employ comparative theology
- to recognize, examine, and compare feminist, Muslima, and other liberation theologies of Islam and Christianity
- This class will develop
 - foundational skills in critically reading and discussing primary sources in theology
 - forms of written and oral self-expression and reflection on issues in theology and the study of religion
 - a foundation for further study of Islam, Christianity, and comparative theology
 - the imagination and creativity in engaging theological questions



Humanities courses are not merely about names, places, and dates, they are about **critical thinking and the conceptualization of ideas**. Most importantly, humanities courses train an individual to **entertain an idea other than one's own**. They exercise the **imagination** in an attempt to enter into the ways in which **various human cultures** from different times and places have understood **what it means to be human**. Additionally, humanities classes explore questions of **power, inequality, inequity, justice, truth, beauty, goodness, and human flourishing**. If you forget a date, place, or name, just ask me, in person or after class, during office hours, or via email.



- What is/are the argument(s) or thesis/es of a given text, and what are the presuppositions of the argument(s) or thesis/es (i.e., the facts, norms, and experiences presumed by the text)?
- What is the presumed knowledge? What background is assumed?
- What is the history of this idea? What is the future of this idea?
- How does this idea shape history, self, community?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of the argument?
- What is another perspective or alternative?
- What is most/least important to the argument?
- Who produced this knowledge and why may that matter?
- Who benefits from this idea? Who is harmed?
- Who is in authority in this system?
- Who is most directly affected?
- Where will this idea take us?
- Where are there similar concepts, situations, theories, or practices outside the context of the text?
- Why is this relevant to me or others?
- Why and when are people influenced by this?
- Why should people know about this?
- Why has it been this way for so long?
- Why is there a need for this today?
- How does this disrupt things?
- How do we know the truth about this?
- How does this idea lead to justice? Truth? Beauty? Goodness? Human Flourishing?
- How does this idea lead to injustice?

**Education Is Not A Product.
The Students Are Not Customers.
The Professors Are Not Tools.
The University Is Not A Factory.**



late policy

if you want feedback, then assignments need to be submitted w/in 24 hours of due date. after 10 days, highest possible grade is 70%,

be a luddite

cell phones prohibited
laptops prohibited
take notes by hand
hold a physical book

gaze into the eyes of your neighbor
technology will always be with us, let's take a break from it in this classroom (aside from digital images, audio, and so on, of course)

just don't cheat

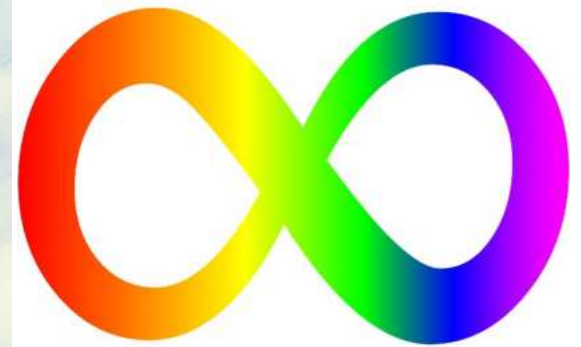
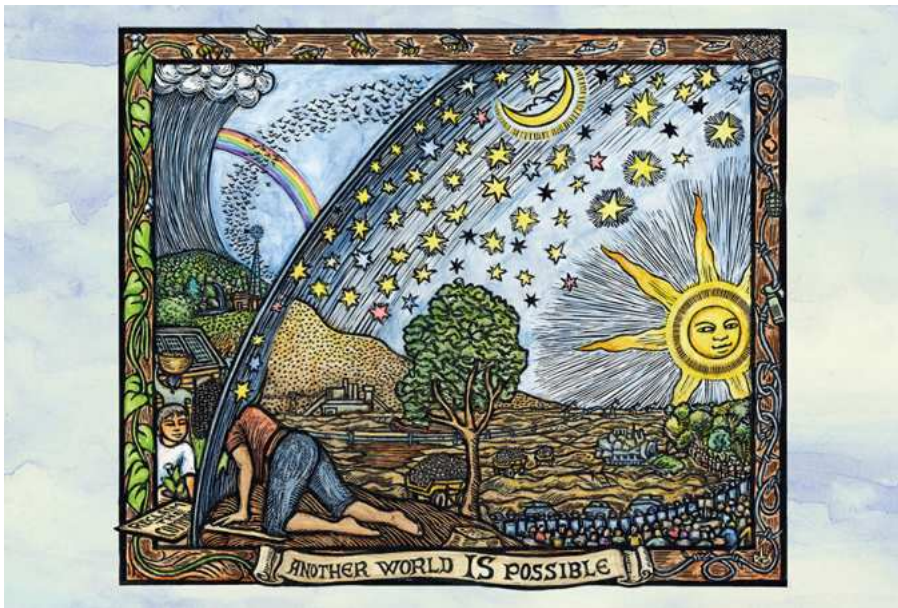
The Department of Religion considers Academic Integrity of the utmost importance. When we enter higher education, we join a community of scholars held together by a love for knowledge, intellectual engagement, and mutual trust. Cheating of any kind, but plagiarism in particular, destroys trust, betrays disrespect for the processes of learning to which we, as the Department of Religion, are committed, and mocks genuine intellectual engagement. The Department of Religion considers all cheating and plagiarism serious breaches of academic integrity.



How many of you can't even? I am stressed, you are stressed. The world doesn't have to be this way! Think of this classroom as imagining a future free of anxiety while preparing you for the reality that the world remains colonized by a work-work-work mentality.

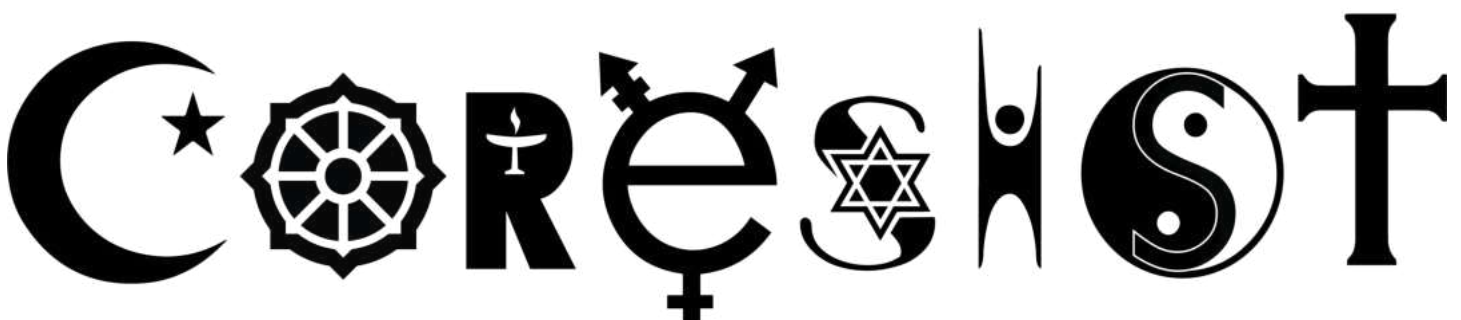


UNDOC**UALLY**



Whatever your race, (ir)religion, sexual orientation, ethnicity, gender identity or expression, trauma-informed knowledge and experience, neurology, country of origin, native language, immigration status, English-speaking capacities, socioeconomic status, dis/abilities—you, your views, your knowledge, and your experiences are valued and affirmed.

-alternative assignments and assessments are always possible-



Assignment and Assessment Details

Attendance and Class Participation

Attendance and participation are mandatory. While this class is not a seminar, some participation can only improve your grade.

Assessment

- Attendance 9/10
- Participating at least once 9.5/10
- Participating twice 10/10

Attending class will earn you an A- for this portion of your weighted grade. Participating in class will earn you an A.

I recognize that some students may have social anxiety or other issues that may make participation difficult. Please, email me so that we may work together to craft strategies for you to succeed in this portion of the class.

Image: *The first verse (Surah) of the Quran is revealed to the Prophet Muhammad by the Archangel Gabriel on Mount Hira, completed 1595 (gouache on paper); Miniature from "Siyer-i Nebi" (Siyer i Nebi), epic poem recounting the life of the Prophet Muhammad*



Religious/Ethical/Spiritual Autobiography

In class we will read portions of **Augustine's Confessions** and **al-Ghazālī's Deliverance from Error**. Both of these are **autobiographies**. Additionally, we will explore a modern theory of "**religious account**" by Paul Griffiths.

You are to write (or create—see below) your own religious/ethical/spiritual autobiography drawing from Griffiths' theory and learning from the Christian and Muslim examples. In this self-reflective essay, you will look back at your relevant past experiences, and make meaning, find value, and discover T/truth in them in the manner that Augustine and al-Ghazālī do.

Remember, an autobiography is not merely a recollection of memories that are then transposed into words on a page. Rather, it is the *present self writing the past self*. Do your best to give a narrative to your essay, tracing the encounters that you think shaped you, and extrapolating ("authentically fabricating") beyond your memories.

Look back at your relevant past experiences, and make meaning, find value, and discover T/truth in them, even if in the past moment you surely did not reflect on them in this way.

Religious/Ethical/Spiritual Autobiography, continued

Aims

- To self-reflect critically on your own religious, spiritual, and/or ethical formation as a human person;
- to engage Griffiths theory of a religious account and apply it to your own life;
- to comprehend and compare Augustine's and al-Ghazālī's autobiography
- to re-create and express an autobiography using Augustine's and al-Ghazālī's as a template
- To to explore the "comprehensive, unsurpassable, and central" features of your religious, spiritual, and/or ethical (RSE) formation
- to give a "genealogy" of your religious, spiritual, and/or ethical formation.
- to explore your understanding of faith, reason, imagination, and the relationship among them

Assessment

Length

- min. 1200 written words, or
- 6-10 minutes of spoken word (audio only or video); this can be a podcast interview, a video interview, spoken word performance, poetic reading, or some other creative A/V endeavor (speak with me if you wish to pursue this option)
- Artistic representation of your RSE autobiography in a medium approved by me beforehand, along with 450-to-900-word explanation/interpretation of the work of art (speak with me if you wish to pursue this option)

Content

- You engage Griffiths' theory and in some way express the comprehensive, central, and unsurpassable features of your RSE formation
- Connect your RSE formation to teachers, mentors, family members, etc.
- Connect your RSE formation to media you have engaged—books, TV, film, etc.
 - While RSE formations historically have tended to be shaped by explicitly religious discourses (Church, Synagogue, Temple, Mosque, etc., Hebrew Bible, New Testament, Qur'an, etc.), strive to think "outside the box" and name and discuss non-religious discourses that may have shaped your RSE formation (e.g., soccer team, community youth group, politician, activist, economic theory, financial situation, race, gender, ethnic, sexual, or socioeconomic identities, consumer products, advertising, popular culture--singer, song, TV show, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Tiktok, website, etc.)
- Throughout, detail your understanding of the meaning of faith with respect to reason; what is the meaning of reason and faith for you, and how do they relate? How do the sources of your RSE formation correspond to faith or reason or both?

Treatise on Love

In class, we will read various Islamic and Christian treatises or expositions on love—loving God, loving self, and loving others. These primary sources will be complemented by a few secondary sources and in-class discussions.

In this assignment, you will connect these treatises on love to your own personal experiences and viewpoints on love and write your own Treatise on Love. Once again, the format for the Treatise on Love is open.

Aims

- to comprehend and compare various Islamic and Christian theologies or expositions on love
- to apply these theologies to your own experience and understanding of love—what is love, what is the purpose of love, how do we love, why do we love
- to propose deep connections among love of self, love of others, and love of God/Truth or Ultimate Purpose
- to develop your own theology of love based on primary sources covered in class and your own experience and knowledge
- to test reason against love and faith

Assessment

Length

- min. 1000 written words, or
- 5-8 minutes of spoken word (audio only or video); this can be a podcast interview, a video interview, spoken word performance, poetic reading, or some other creative A/V endeavor (speak with me if you wish to pursue this option)
- Artistic representation of your RSE autobiography in a medium approved by me beforehand, along with 400-to-800-word explanation/interpretation of the work of art (speak with me if you wish to pursue this option)

Content

- explain love's causes and effects: why do we love? how should we love? what is the purpose of love? where does love take us? whom should we love?
- connect various loves—self, other, God—and also various objects of love: persons vs. objects—how are they connected or not connected?
- Are all loves good? How or how not? How do we judge whether a love is good or not?



“The fainting of Laylah and Majnun”, lovers from the Nizami’s narrative poem (12th c.). 16th c. illustration (miniature)

Thesis-driven, comparative essay

You are to write a short comparative essay regarding the primary sources for any given Unit. The essay must have an arguable thesis, be comparative in nature, and address both sets of textual traditions assigned for the Unit, i.e., the Islamic and Christian primary sources in comparison.

Aims

- To read carefully and critically two textual traditions in conversation with each other
- To have one text interrogate the other text, and vice-versa
- To argue a thesis that is comparative in nature
- to demonstrate a grasp of the material from the unit
- to exercise your ability to analyze primary source texts in translation

Details

The short, thesis-driven critical and comparative essay should be based on **two primary texts or sets of texts** assigned for the units/topics below. On the **assigned due date**, you will be expected to **submit your first draft**. I will read and comment on it, offer edits, and return it to you. You will then **revise the essay and submit your final draft by _____TBD_____**.

Units/Topics

- Revelation
- Proof of God's Existence
- Grace and Freedom
- Negative (Apophatic) and Affirmative (Kataphatic) Theology
- Affective/Erotic/Love Mysticism
- Imagination and Poetry Confronts Reason
- Liberation Theology

In class and through readings, we will encounter theories and methods of comparison for this essay. You will then apply these theories and methods.



Creative Response

Students will create an art project that creatively responds to one of the unit themes (except the first one) covered in this class. They will be required to submit the art project and a 300-word-minimum analysis of the artwork explaining how the piece connects, responds, and engages the theme in question. You must cite from three different assigned readings.

Art may be in any media—though an image file will have to be uploaded. Digital art, photography, poetry, DALL-E open ai art, short story, TikTok, drawing, painting, textile arts, and so on.

Assessment

You will be assessed on your 300-word analysis more than your artistic talent. Do you engage the theologies—primary and secondary sources—from the unit? Do you cite three times from three different assigned readings? Is your analysis clear, cogent, and coherent?



This was created using DALL-E openAI with the terms: “a flash of light shooting out of a mirror, up into an image of the earth, digital art”

Final: Group Oral Exam and Discussion

Option 1: Group Oral Exam and Discussion

In brief, you will be assigned a group of 3 or 4 students and participate in a group oral exam. But, *your* grade is based only on what *you* say.

How to prepare and what will be on it?

During the last 10 minutes of every class, together we will collect the main ideas and themes. We will formulate a question or two that summarizes the readings and discussion that took place. These ideas, themes, and questions will be the basis of your oral exam. **If you do the reading, take notes, and participate in discussion, you will basically be ready for the oral exam.**

The questions will not be fact-based, but critical and constructive.

How will the group oral exam be run?

Each student will be asked one question. Once they respond, others can jump in and respond additionally. You will be graded only on what you say, not on what others say. In other words, you are responsible for your own words.

What is the rubric?

Preparedness 25%

Do you speak in a manner that is literate, intelligent, and proficient with the material? Do you engage the material in a manner that demonstrates you have thought carefully about the question, themes, and ideas?

Clarity 25%

Are you clear and concise? Do you convey in a manner that is coherent and cogent? I may ask to clarify something that you said; this is your opportunity!

Creativity 25%

Do you move beyond a rote repetition of the course material in creative ways? Do you offer something new? Do you creatively bring two or more topics or readings together to create something new in your responses?

References 25%

Do you refer to the course readings, or the authors and their projects we covered in class?



St. Francis and the Sultan, by R. Lentz, OFM

Schedule of Classes and Assigned Readings

In previous iterations of this class that I have taught at Seton Hall, I typically begin with an **introduction to theology** in both the Christian and Islamic traditions. Then, a brief overview of “**comparison**”, both comparative theology and comparative religion.

I have then covered the following topics/units:

- Revelation: Muhammad + Qur’ān and Jesus
- Scripture: Reception and Refraction
- Proofing God’s Existence
- Religious/Theological Autobiographies
- Free will and Divine Predestination (Grace and Free Will)
- Negative (Apophatic) and Affirmative (Kataphatic) Theology
- Affective/Erotic/Love Mysticism
- Imagination and Poetry Confronts Reason
- Liberation Theologies
- Feminist Theologies
- Contemporary Voices

We have read a selection of the following primary and secondary source authors in comparison in previous iterations of this class—always changing it up and selecting various options:

- **Contemporary Muslim Voices:** Martin Nguyen, Jerusha Rhodes, Joseph Lumbard, Sa'diyya Shaikh, William Chittick, James Morris, Farid Esack, and others
- **Contemporary Christian Voices:** M. Shawn Copeland, Catherine Keller, David Bentley Hart, Elizabeth Johnson, Frank Clooney, Catherine Cornille, Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, Gustavo Gutiérrez, and others.
- **Christian primary source:** New Testament, Early Creeds, Tertulian, Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, Athanasius, Augustine, Pseudo-Dionysius, Cappadocians, Maximus Confessor, Anselm, Aquinas, Marguerite Porete, Catherine of Siena, John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila, Victorines (Hugh, Adam, Achard, Richard, and Godfrey of St. Victor), William of St. Thierry, Bernard of Clairvaux, Bonaventure, Jacopone da Todi, Francis de Sales, Gerald Manley Hopkins
- **Islamic primary sources:** Qur’an, hadith, Al-Ash‘arī, ‘Abd al-Jabbār, Al-Ghazālī, Aḥmad al-Ghazālī, Ibn Tufayl, Avicenna, Ibn al-‘Arabī, Ibn Taymiyya, Fakhr al-Dīn ‘Irāqī, Jāmī, Rūmī, Ḥāfīz, ‘Aṭṭār, Nasīr al-Dīn Tūsī, Dawūd al-Qaysārī,