

# Religion and the Arts



FOUN 098-11

Bucknell University • Department of Religion • Fall 2007  
Coleman Hall Rm 20 • T/Th 8:00-9:22 a.m.

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As long as recorded history, and probably long before, human beings around the world have been engaged in some form of religious practice. For just as long we have been creating works of art. In fact, with a few exceptions (e.g., Myron's *Discobolus*), until the European Renaissance and the emergence of 'bourgeois' painting in the Netherlands, these two activities were inextricably interlinked. One could go so far as to argue that religion has always been a form of art, and that traditional art in most cultures has always been nothing less than an expression of religious belief — however defined. This deep and abiding connection has not, however, been without its strains and tensions. One of the most enduring problems of artistic creation has been the limit of representation vis-à-vis things divine or unseen. Artistic blasphemy and iconoclasm have been around for as long as art and religion, and are still very much with us today, as a rampant media culture and the forces of globalization bring about new versions of ancient clashes such as the Danish cartoon controversy.



## Course Description

In this course we will examine the nexus of religion and art, both at the level of theory and in terms of the use (and limits) of art for religious purposes, through a close analysis of specific works of religious art from a variety of world religions. The course is structured thematically (rather than chronologically or by tradition), which will allow us to examine these works in a comparative and cross-cultural fashion. Particular emphasis will be placed on learning to 'read' visual images and relate such to religious doctrines, movements, and cultural understandings. This includes an examination of the secularization of art in modern times, the romantic/modernist notion of art itself as a form of spirituality, as well as the use (and abuse?) of religious images in contemporary media and in the context of Western consumerism.

## Course Objectives

This course is intended to: 1) familiarize students with some of the major works, themes and vocabulary of religious art in various Western and Asian traditions; 2) develop an understanding of the relation between religion and the visual arts at the level of theory and practice, 3) appreciate the variety of approaches to religious art as a means for propagation of doctrine and values, as well as the historical dynamics of art as a religious 'method' and the perceived limits of art to express religious truth; and 4) develop the requisite critical skills (both oral and written) with which to engage in discussion and debate in an academic context. With respect to the last of these objectives, as a foundation seminar this course will emphasize the following:

- a) active, independent learning;
- b) collaborative learning;
- c) developing your capacity for critical analysis, reflection, judgment and creativity;
- d) cultivating the ability to examine issues from multiple perspectives;
- e) developing skills necessary to engage in intellectual endeavors at Bucknell and beyond.

## Course Format

The course follows a seminar format, which means that rather than have 45 minutes of lecture followed by 30 minutes of questions and discussion, lecture time will be integrated with discussion. Students are expected to play a leading role in developing questions and topics for class discussion, based on assigned readings but reflective of their own critical insights and perspectives. As already noted, *the* primary goal of the course is for students to develop critical thinking and writing skills. Evaluation will be based on class participation, short written assignments, an oral presentation and a final paper (see Course Requirements, below).

## Pedagogical Note:

It is my goal to create a comfortable, enjoyable, and occasionally provocative environment for learning. This is meant to be an *interactive* course; the student will be asked to respond and engage with the course material, and with the ideas and opinions of the instructor and other students – though, it is hoped, always in a civil and polite fashion. Evaluation for the course will be based largely on the demonstration of critical engagement with course material. I will employ various media, including Powerpoint presentations, video and DVDs, CDs, and interactive CD-ROMs in order to stimulate as many learning faculties as possible (if you're lucky, I might even dig out some costumes). Powerpoints will be available prior to each class for those who wish to print them as a basis for note taking.

## Required Reading Material:



- *Art, Creativity, and the Sacred: An Anthology in Religion and Art*, Diana Apostolos-Cappadona, ed. New York: Continuum, 1996.



- *A Pocket Style Manual*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, Diana Hacker. Boston & New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2004.

**Course requirements:**

**1. ATTENDANCE**

Attendance is mandatory. Since the class requires student interaction and discussion, it is absolutely necessary for the student to attend each and every class. Only sickness with a note is considered a valid excuse. Each absence without excuse will result in a 2-point deduction from the participation grade. Being late without an excuse will count as half an absence, thus a 1-point deduction. Five absences without a note will result in automatic failure.

**2. PARTICIPATION**

**25%**

Class participation, including discussion of assigned materials, is a requirement. Participation is a matter of quality not quantity. Thus you do not have to speak every class, but rather show that you have done the readings and are willing and able to engage, in a thoughtful way, with the topics under discussion. Of course, good questions are also an aspect of participation.

**3. ORAL PRESENTATION**

**25%**

All students will explore an important issue associated with one of the major themes of the course, and present their findings in a 20-minute in-class presentation. Topics and presentations schedule will be assigned early in the semester.

**4. INTEGRATED WRITING**

**50%**

A large part of this course will be devoted to writing, understood as a *process* rather than simply a *means* of communication. In order to achieve this, we will be employing methods of *exploratory* writing, i.e., writing that is itself part of the process of developing one's thoughts and arguments (see handout on Teaching Writing: Product vs. Process Model). Here are the assignments you will be responsible for, along with their respective 'weights':

1) In-class writing		NE
2) Response Journal		10%
3) Reaction papers	4 x 5% =	20%
4) Abstract for Oral Presentation		NE
5) Final Paper		20%

1) The first and simplest of these methods is **IN-CLASS WRITING**: every so often, at the beginning, middle or end of the class, I will ask you to spend five minutes writing a response to a specific question or problem related to one of the readings or to an image that we are studying. This time can also be used to write questions or note points of confusion. It is important to understand that exploratory writing is primarily for your sake, to help you clarify your thoughts and to develop your writing skills without having to worry about grammar, structure or organization. Though your in-class writing will not be evaluated, I will take your effort into account when compiling your participation grade.

2) In addition to in-class writing, you are also required to keep an ongoing open-ended **JOURNAL** of the course. Like the in-class writing assignments the journal is meant to be primarily exploratory in nature. You have a lot of freedom as to what you write, the only criteria being that the journal is a) typed, single-spaced, b) between 400-500 words per week (i.e., no more than ONE single-spaced, typed page). On occasion, I will ask you to reflect on or respond to specific issues or questions raised in class or the readings; your journal responses on these days will serve as initial drafts towards a Reaction Paper (RP). If I *do not* assign a specific question or problem, you may briefly summarize the lectures or readings (e.g., aspects you found interesting, inspiring, problematic or downright confusing), agree or disagree with something said in class discussion, apply some aspect of the course to your personal life or prior learning, make connections between different parts of the course, and so on. Each week's entry will be handed in at the beginning of Tuesday's class the following week, and will be worth a cumulative 10% of your final grade. Evaluation will be simple: a minus (-) for unsatisfactory work, a check (✓) for work that meets expectations, and a plus sign (⊕) for work that is particularly strong. These correspond roughly with a 'C', 'B' and 'A' grade, respectively.

3) About every two weeks, I will ask you to write a **REACTION PAPER** in response to a specific issue or question raised in the lecture, class discussion, or readings. After receiving feedback on an initial 'draft' submitted as part of your journal, you will be required to construct a more formal argument on that particular topic. What you argue is much less important than how well you construct your argument and your written powers of persuasion. These papers will be worth 5% each and will act as practice for your final paper. See Grading Criteria for details on how these will be evaluated.

4) You will be expected to write a short (150-word) **ABSTRACT** in preparation for your oral presentation and final paper. Unlike the above exercises, the abstract is meant to be a formal summary of your intended argument. These will be submitted towards the end of September. Feedback will be provided.

5) Last but not least, students will be asked to write a 10-page **FINAL PAPER**, which will act as the summation of the above writing assignments. The final paper will be on the same topic as the oral presentation, but I expect you to go into more detail with the topic, and present a solid piece of formal writing based on a 'argument' that is your own. Final papers will be handed in no later than the last day of our class, December 4. Although I will not look at drafts, I will allow for optional revision on papers that receive a grade of less than B-.







# Religion and the Arts

## Presentations: Peer Review

As noted in the Grading Policy handout, evaluation of oral presentations is based on three criteria: preparedness/research (10%), style/fluency (10%), and props (i.e., handouts, slides, Powerpoint, etc.) (5%). Thus, in making comments on the oral presentations of your peers, I want you to consider these three categories: 1) content/preparation is the presentation is well researched, organized, with adequate but not too much content and specificity? 2) style is the presentation delivered in a fluid, composed, engaged and unhurried manner; 3) props how well prepared/effective is the Powerpoint or accompanying visual information? Although the grades for the presentations will ultimately be decided by JMS, I will seriously consider your input when making my decisions.

### **PRESENTATION #1**

CONTENT/PREPARATION:

STYLE:

PROPS:

OTHER COMMENTS:

### **PRESENTATION #2**

CONTENT/PREPARATION:

STYLE:

PROPS:

OTHER COMMENTS:

### **PRESENTATION #3**

CONTENT/PREPARATION:

STYLE:

PROPS:

OTHER COMMENTS:

### **PRESENTATION #4**

CONTENT/PREPARATION:

STYLE:

PROPS:

OTHER COMMENTS: