

COLLEGE GUILD
PO Box 6448, Brunswick Maine 04011

Religion

Unit 1 of 3

Introduction

Welcome to the College Guild course Religion.

Overview: This course, based on a Theorizing Religion course at a four-year university, explores the idea of religion as something that is found in almost every civilization and culture and why it continues to survive to this day.

Guidelines for all College Guild courses:

1. **Answer all the questions that are in bold print, using black or blue ink or dark pencil if possible.** After we receive and review your completed Unit, we will send you feedback from your reader along with your original work and the next Unit. You don't need to return the questions – it saves us both postage.
2. There is no **specific deadline** to complete any Unit, but we would get concerned if we hadn't heard back from you after two months.
3. Remember how often the mail service loses things. **If you don't hear back from us after a month, please write to make sure we received your Unit** and sent out the next one.

Let us know if you need a dictionary, free to students who complete the first unit.

This course is designed to include thinkers and philosophers that are often excluded from the predominantly European philosophical school of thought. Therefore, the hope is that CG philosophy students will be able to expand their knowledge to compelling ideas from other parts of the world that often challenge the very foundations of western thought.

This course is not designed to be a survey on the religions of the world. It is rather designed to explore the idea of religion as something that survives in almost every civilization and culture and why it continues to survive to this day. We will not only be critical or mindful of the theories concerning religion's roots and survival, but also the ways theorists have reached such their conclusions. The goal of this course is unpacking the complex ways "religion" is understood, practiced and studied, and looking at the ways religion intersects with other fields of inquiry such as political science, media studies and Middle Eastern studies, just to name a few!

Before we dive right in, let's take a moment to contemplate what the word "religion" means to you.

1. **What words do you think of when the word "religion" comes to mind?**
2. **How do you personally identify or associate with religion?**

If you type "religion" into the Google search engine, this is what you get:

re·li·gion
rə'lijən/

noun

1. the belief in and worship of a superhuman controlling power, especially a personal God or gods.
Ex: "ideas about the relationship between science and religion"
2. a particular system of faith and worship.
Ex: "the world's great religions"
3. a pursuit or interest to which someone ascribes supreme importance.
Ex: "consumerism is the new religion"

3. Do you agree with these definitions of religion? What would you add or take away from them?

How did the study of religion as we know it today develop in the first place? For a long time the study of religion was limited to theological schools that only studied designated religious texts such as the Bible. One of the first people to ask what everyday people were actually doing who practiced religion was William James (1842-1910). James was a trained physician and an American professor who was the first to offer a psychology course in the United States. In his book, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James interviewed people who claimed to have mystical experiences where they got in touch with the divine or, for example, where they had out of body experiences wherein spirits took over their bodies. While many scholars dismissed these individuals' experiences, James took their experiences seriously in order to find patterns or connections between these seemingly random and incomprehensible experiences.

In one of his accounts, James writes:

Nothing is more common in the pages of religious biography than the way in which seasons of lively and of difficult faith are described as alternating. Probably every religious person has the recollection of particular crisis in which a direct vision of the truth, a direct perception, perhaps, of a living God's existence, swept in and overwhelmed the languor of the more ordinary belief.

In James Russell Lowell's correspondence there is a brief memorandum of an experience of this kind:

I had a revelation last Friday evening. I was at Mary's, and happening to say something of the presence of spirits (of whom, I said, I was often dimly aware). Mr. Putnam entered into an argument with me on spiritual matters. As I was speaking, the whole system rose up before me like a vague destiny looming from the Abyss. I never before so clearly felt the Spirit of God in me and around me. The whole room seemed to me full of God. The air seemed to waver to and fro with the presence of Something I knew not what. I spoke with the calmness and clearness of a prophet. I cannot tell you what this revelation was. I have not yet studied it enough. But I shall perfect it one day, and then you shall hear it and acknowledge its grandeur.

4. **Have you ever had an experience like this? If yes and you feel comfortable sharing, please describe an account you might provide to James upon his inquiry. If not, turn yourself into a fictional character from any era and describe a mystical experience.**
5. **How do you think these individuals felt when a renowned scholar like James took the time to listen and record their mystical experiences?**
6. **What do you think about James's methodology as a scholar? Is it ethical? Is it rigorous? Is it verifiable?**

In the book, James defined religion as "the feelings, acts and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine" (31).

For James, of primary importance was the individual's experience. He believed that religious experience is uniquely authoritative because it is uniquely private. For him, religious texts in themselves should be considered secondary as forms of codification and institutionalization of belief systems.

7. Do you agree with James's definition of religion?

8. Do you agree with his attitude towards religious texts?

James challenged the purely theoretical world of religious study as exemplified at theological schools by looking at how people manipulated their bodies to get these experiences. In other words, James opened up the field of religious study to consider not only how people thought and believed while practicing religions, but also the deeply felt and bodily experienced elements of it.

In his book, James outlined the ways one can access "mystic" experience:

1. Intoxication
2. Repetition of mantras
3. Drugs

9. Why do you think human beings seek out "mystical" experiences?

10. Do you agree that alcohol can lead to a mystic experience? Mantras? Drugs?

A contemporary scholar who has worked in the same vein as William James is Jonathan Z. Smith, a religious historian in the U.S. Like James, Smith aimed to destigmatize and understand religious experiences that are shunned by mainstream notions of religion. He did this by looking at groups called "cults," a pejorative term used to describe groups that are thought to be fanatical and distasteful with their ideologies and practices.

In his academic article, "The Devil in Mr. Jones" (1982) Smith focused on a particular event. He did a case study which the media named the Jonestown Massacre. A religious group active in the 1970s called the Peoples Temple led by Jim Jones established a private settlement in Guyana. Their goal was to create a community that would be a place where white and black members of the group could live together in harmony when the group started to become criticized as radical for their socialist tendencies and racial integration. There were also rumors that this community that started out as a utopia became increasingly more like a prison as Jones subjected residents to grueling work hours and forbade anyone from leaving. Media scrutiny of the settlement exploded when on November 18, 1978, a total of 918 Jonestown residents died after taking cyanide together.

11. Why do you think the media decided to call this event the Jonestown Massacre instead of the Jonestown Mass Suicide or something else?

12. How does the media influence how we perceive religion and religious groups?

13. Furthermore, since the Peoples Temple formed out of Jones's work as a Southern Methodist pastor, why was the word "cult" used in this situation instead of calling it a Christian group?

By studying the way the media sensationalized this event as the workings of a cult, Smith uncovered an inherent bias in the field of religious studies. It is the belief that religions, particularly of the Christian variety, are inherently more valid and civilized.

Smith states: *So a new term had to be created, that of "cult," to segregate these uncivil phenomena from religion. (111).*

He saw the use of the word "cult" as a way of distancing oneself and stopping oneself from trying to make the phenomena understandable. Smith saw this as problematic and irresponsible for academic institutions in the humanities that are responsible for providing insight into seemingly incomprehensible and horrific events.

14. Do you agree with Smith that human behavior and emotions are ultimately explainable?

15. How would you explain what happened at Jonestown? What would compel people to commit mass suicide?

16. Do you think the term "cult" should be put to rest or do you think there are situations in which the term is appropriate?

Considering events like Jonestown, it is understandable that some people have become wary of religious organizations. Because of this, governments have taken steps to often neutralize the threat they pose by creating so called "secular" or religion-free spaces. Next time, despite such measures, we will be looking at the ways religions and politics continue to intersect.

Remember: First names only & please let us know if your address changes