

ISS9RC - Religion and Conflict

In recent years the public and academic discourse and media engagement with religion and conflict has been predominantly focused on the relatively narrow field of violence, terrorism and fundamentalism. This is particularly the case in relation to the Islamic world and faith. This is an important conversation to have in our globalised but highly stratified world. However it by no means the whole picture or conversation that religion and conflict should encompass. Therefore, although this perspective will be given some consideration, this course will focus on sources and case studies of conflict and it will specifically engage with Christian and Islamic traditions as well as secular traditions.

We will be inquiring together into the history, causes, characteristics and presentation of religious conflict, but none of us should expect to leave the class at the end of the course with a definitive explanation for it. There are, at this point in our collective human history, no clear "right answers" that cannot be questioned. What we can do, however, and what I hope we will accomplish in this course, is to learn to ask the right questions and to respond in creative ways to the questions.

So what are some of those questions? This is merely a sample; it is not an exhaustive list. We will consider;

1. What do we mean by the terms, religious, secular, conflict and violence? What are the implications and application of that understanding?
2. Should we understand, and therefore accept, conflict as an intrinsic part of human nature?
3. When does religion promote and when does it discourage conflict or violence and why?
4. If we can understand conflict within human nature and understand conflict within religion, why do we find such acts offensive? How does that link with the notion that to understand is to forgive?
5. Can we assign value to acts or incidents of conflict, and if so are we assigning value to religion?

Course objective:

The purpose of this course is to introduce students to the sociological and analytic study of religion, identity, conflict and violence within a local, national and global context. It will examine issues such as nationalism, colonialism, international affairs and the role of those charged with reporting such conflicts. Extensive attention will be paid to the representation of religious conflict in the arts, such as literature and films, alongside a detailed examination in of the violent groups that have arisen as an apparent reaction to religious fundamentalism as a rising narrative of a new cultural war.

By the end of the course students will be expected to:

- Develop the skills of analysis, critique and the drawing of inference from both acts of religious and secular / institutional conflict and the statements or public reactions to those acts, including those presented by the news media.
- Understand and demonstrate ability in analysing the arguments of a variety of scholars of religion. To complete this to an adequate level you will be expected to draw upon a variety of sources and contexts both within and without academia and with regards to religion, secular and conflict.
- Demonstrate your ability to make critical judgements and formulate your own arguments and questions about violence and its related topics in a variety of standard and creative ways.

Course assessment and grading:

The purpose of assessment is to enable you as the student to demonstrate your critical and analytical skills in a manner that is relevant to your personal and intellectual development, to the job market you will eventually be entering and most importantly to the world you will be helping to shape and improve. Assessment is not intended to be merely abstract displays of rote knowledge with no contextual or real life value. Instead they are designed to provide you with a wide range of methods to display your talents in their best light, to re-invigorate skills you may have neglected and to develop new skills. As such then, you will have the opportunity to follow your own particular area of interest through seminar presentation, essays (2) and personal reading (in addition there will be suggested recommended further reading) during the course.

Extensive details and admin information regarding seminar presentations and essays will be provided in the first class and posted on the portal afterwards. The first essay will be a closed question, that is, only one question will be provided and it will be based solely on your field trip / excursion experience to Stirling Castle. The second essay will be a choice of 4 questions based on work undertaken in the course. The second essay will focus on the overall themes of the course and you will be expected to make explicit reference to material covered in the course. Both sets of essay questions will be provided beforehand, on the first day of class.

Reading:

All students will have the opportunity to purchase a course reader which will contain the specific readings required for each class. They are provided at cost and belong to the student after purchase, so you are welcome (and encouraged) to make notes, highlight etc as you read and take part in activities in class and you can continue to use them in your studies in your home university.

In addition to this, recommend further reading will be suggested during classes. These texts are not included in your course reader but are available in the university library. The purpose is for greater in-depth study for whichever essay you choose and the seminar presentation you will make or for personal interest. You are not expected to purchase these books prior to or during the course, though of course if you wish to afterwards for personal further study most will be available online or at your university bookshop.

You are expected to, and it is your responsibility, to ensure that you keep your reading up to date for the class. You will typically have one or two readings to do in preparation for each class. They will not be substantial in length but you should ensure that you are reading them properly and critically engaging with them, a quick skim read 10 minutes before class will not suffice or do you any justice!

If you are new to the topic or indeed new to the study of religion, you may find it helpful to seek out a series of very small introductory books known as the “Very Short Introduction” series, by the Oxford University Press. These are available on Amazon usually for less than £2. They will generally not be included within your course reader as they are basic introductions but they are none the less excellent background sources. They are all written by recognised academic experts in their fields. The following ones are particularly recommended for the issues we will be covering in this course:

- The Bible by John Riches (2000)
- The Koran by Michael Cook (2000)
- Fundamentalism by Malise Ruthven (2007)
- Religion in America by Timothy Beal (2008)
- Christianity by Linda Woodhead (2004)
- Islam by Malise Ruthven (2012 updated version 2000)

Proposed schedule:

The following areas will be covered in class and seminars:

1. The nature of conflict and its relationship to issues of religion: issues of definition.
2. The contemporary academic debate on religion and conflict and its main theoreticians.
3. The notion of spiritual warfare and the concept of holy war in Islam and Christianity.
4. Fundamentalism, revelation and interpretation in Islam and Christianity.
5. Contextualisation of conflict: contemporary examples in the UK, Europe and the USA.
6. Media representations and the creation of perspectives on religion and conflict.
7. The changing nature of ‘religious conflict’ post 9/11 and responses.

There will also be a field trip to Stirling Castle, the original seat of the Stewart monarchy of Scotland and the direct links to the conflict in Northern Ireland will be drawn out during the tour.