

*Honors College 185: Religion and Secularism(s) in the Modern Age*  
MWF 10:50-11:40 University Heights North 16

Thomas Borchert  
Associate Professor of Religion, University of Vermont  
Office: 481 Main St.  
Office hours: M 2-3; Tues 11-12:30 or by appointment.  
[thomas.borchert@uvm.edu](mailto:thomas.borchert@uvm.edu)

### **Description**

In 21<sup>st</sup> century America, we often presume that there is a clear difference between the religious and the secular. The public sphere, the world of politics, the nation and most of our culture, is secular and things that are religious are limited to the private sphere. This is in part the result of modernization theory, a reigning paradigm of the middle 20<sup>th</sup> century, which predicted the decline of religion. This decline was seen as part of a long term process of the “triumph” of the modern and the secular over the irrationality of the religious sphere. However, since the late 1970s with both the Iranian Revolution, and the rise of fundamentalism across religious traditions, scholars have come to see that the triumph of the secular over religion was a misguided way of framing the question, even though they still struggle to understand how to frame the relationship between religious and secular modes of being. In this course, we will explore the problem of thinking about religions and “the” secular in the current moment. By looking at problems of identity, belonging and governance, we will interrogate how these two categories are intertwined in contemporary communities and nation-states.

The processes that we are discussing in this course are global ones, and some of the material will be focused on European and American societies. However most of our time will be spent focusing on how these processes play out in emerging Asian nation-states. In particular, China and India provide the backdrop for the development of “secular” and “religious” spheres. These countries are both places with vast cultural histories, and rich ethnic and religious diversities, but that have different relationships to colonialism and processes of modernization. India was a fully colonized country where modern ideas were imposed, before being appropriated by Indians; China was a semi-colonized country where Chinese people appropriated western categories in order to avoid becoming colonized. By examining the different experiences of modernization, and the roles that the categories of religion and secular came to be part of the national communities, we will see how religious communities come to be governed by modern, secular states, as well as the ways that states seek to categorize people according religion in relation to categorizations of race, ethnicity and language.

The course will be organized around three different topics.

- 1) Defining Religion and the Secular
- 2) Secular forms of Religion: political religion (nationalism) and spirituality
- 3) Governing Religion in a Secular Society

### **Learning objectives**

- a) Through studying the spread of modern categories such as “religion” or “secularism” particularly in primarily Asian contexts through imperialism, anti-colonialist movements and the strategic appropriation by local actors, students gain an understanding of how powerful categories of knowledge shape human societies.
- b) By studying how states and national actors use “religious” or “secular” modes of being as the foundation for national unity, students gain critical knowledge of the ways that societies privilege certain forms of practice; how these categories both establish and reinforce hierarchies and prejudices in the societies in question; and how modern nation-states have come to govern societies based in part on these dynamics of privilege;
- c) Through focusing on the assumptions about “religion,” “secularism,” and related terminology in popular media, students will gain skills in critical reading
- d) Through developing a research grant proposal, and coming to understand how research questions shape our knowledge, students will both develop critical research skills and develop writing skills central to future research, particularly in the humanities or social sciences.

## **Assignments**

The assignments for this course will have several different components. It will be organized as a seminar. Students will be expected to actively participate in discussions, and will also be required to bring pre-written questions to class to foster discussion. On a weekly basis, we will examine media accounts of the events of the day (newspaper, blog postings, etc) in order to interrogate assumptions about both religion and non-religion in problems of politics and communities. It is writing intensive, and students should expect to write 20 pages across three assignments. Among these assignments will be a critical book review, focused on one of the two middle problems of the course, an ethnographic report and a grant proposal for a research project. This proposal will include the formulation of a research problem, lit review and a plan for conducting research; some of these sections will include revisions of earlier writing projects in the course.

Every Thursday night, a member of the class will be responsible for locating and distributing to the rest of the class a news article from the previous week that deals with the category of religion, specific religions and/or the problem of the secular. This will provide the beginning of our conversation for Friday’s class.

- Midterm essays (4-5 pages) (20%)
- Final essay (5-6 pages) (20%)
- Ethnographic Research Project (3 pages) (15%)
- Grant Proposal (6-8 pages) (25%)
- Class participation (20%)

## **Books and Readings**

Class will consist of a series of discussion organized around the problematic of the course, and focused around a series of readings which are available on Blackboard and in books I have ordered from the bookstore. .

I have ordered two books for the course, both of which are (or will be) available at the UVM Bookstore:

Courtney Bender, *The New Metaphysicals*  
Ronojoy Sen, *Articles of Faith*

It will facilitate discussion if you have the readings with you (whether photocopies, electronic copies or the book itself). Regardless, you are to have read the material *before* class, and be prepared to ask and answer questions about it.

### **Classroom policies**

We are engaged in a collective endeavor, creating a community of scholars organized around several intellectual problems. We are all responsible for and to each other in the effort to gain an understanding of what are difficult issues within our world, and the success of the class depends in part on the collective. This has several important consequences:

a) attendance. You need to be in class, ready to listen and speak, to think and to argue. You should be on time, having gotten your water or coffee, etc. However, there are days that everyone is tired, low, sick and so forth. You can miss up to three classes without it causing a problem for your grades. You don't need to tell me why, or explain, unless you are responsible that week for a presentation or something (in which case you better not be missed).

b) classroom environment. We will be talking about issues everyday; sometimes I will be presenting, sometimes you will. Intellectual growth requires a safe place and trust within the community. This does not mean that we have to agree with one another. We won't, but it is important to be able to disagree cordially and with respect.

c) electronic devices. I generally discourage use of electronic devices during class. They are distracting to you, to me, to your classmates. but I recognize that some of you take notes with computers, and I've asked you to bring readings to class, and so there is a tension here. If you are using your computer, you should not be using Facebook at the same time, tweeting, etc. You should never be texting in class.

d) make-up policies. Papers can only be rescheduled in exceptional circumstances. If something happens that requires that you reschedule something (Religious holiday, family emergency, athletic event, performance of another sort), it is your responsibility to follow up with me, not the other way around. I will not accept late papers unless you contact me ahead of time.

### **Official Policies**

Student Learning Accommodations: In keeping with University policy, any student with a documented disability interested in utilizing accommodations should contact ACCESS, the office of Disability Services on campus. ACCESS works with students to create reasonable and appropriate accommodations via an accommodation letter to their professors as early as possible each semester.

Contact ACCESS: A170 Living/Learning Center; 802-656-7753; [access@uvm.edu](mailto:access@uvm.edu);  
[www.uvm.edu/access](http://www.uvm.edu/access)

UVM's policy on disability certification and student support:  
[www.uvm.edu/~uvmppg/ppg/student/disability.pdf](http://www.uvm.edu/~uvmppg/ppg/student/disability.pdf)

**Academic Integrity:** The policy addresses plagiarism, fabrication, collusion, and cheating.  
<http://www.uvm.edu/~uvmppg/ppg/student/acadintegrity.pdf>

**Code of Student Rights and Responsibilities**  
[www.uvm.edu/~uvmppg/ppg/student/studentcode.pdf](http://www.uvm.edu/~uvmppg/ppg/student/studentcode.pdf)

This syllabus is basically a contract between you and me, but it can also be modified depending on how things progress in the semester. That is, I may add a reading or modify one depending on how the class progresses.

### **Readings:**

#### **Section 1: key terms and the problem of the course**

Week 1: Religion as a category of knowledge, category of governance, "ground of being"

8/31: Introductory Matters

9/2: Using "Religion"

a) People's Daily, "Religion and Feudal Superstition"

b) David Foster Wallace, "Roger Federer as Religious Experience"

9/4: Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System"

Week 2: "religion" and the secular

9/7: Labor Day: No Class

9/9: Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System; Lincoln, "The Study of Religion in the Current Political Moment"

9/11: Thinking about "the secular"

Bryan Wilson, "Secularization," *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd edition (library website); Nikki

Keddie, "Secularism and its Discontents" *Daedulus*

Week 3: Modernization theory and multiple forms of the Secular

9/14: Modernization Theory: Jose Casanova, "Secularization, Enlightenment and Modern Religion"

[add-drop deadline]

9/16: France: Bauberot, "The Evolution of Secularism in France"; Jansen, "Secularism and Security: France, Islam and Europe," both from Cady and Hurd, "Comparative Secularisms in a Global Age"

9/18: India: T. N. Madan, "Indian Secularism: a Religio-Secular ideal," from Cady and Hurd

Week 4: India and the Devt of knowledge

9/21: Gottschalk, "Religion, Science and Scientism"

9/23: Gottschalk, "Cartography, the Ideal of Science and the Place of Religion"

[Lecture: Peter Gottschalk, "Information You Can Count On: The Indian Census, Hindus, and Muslims from the Mughals to Modi." 4:30-5:45, Thursday 9/24]

9/25: special guest: Peter Gottschalk; "A Raja, a Ghost and a Tribe: Studies in Folklore, Ethnology and Religion."

Week 5: Gender and Secularization

9/28: Najmabadi, "(Un)veiling Feminism"

9/30: Rajan, "Women between Community and State"

10/2: Sands, "Feminisms and Secularisms"

**Section 2: Secular forms of Religion** – how are they really religion, and how are they different?

Week 6: Political Religion *Spirit of Modern Asia* – a few chapters

10/5: **First Essay Due**

10/7: Gentile, intro and chapter 1

10/9: Gentile, chapter 2

Week 7: Nationalism in India and China

10/12 van der Veer, intro, chapter 1

10/14 van der Veer, "Spirituality in Modern Society

10/15 van der Veer, "Smash Temples, Build Schools": Comparing Secularism in India and China; "The Spiritual Body"

Week 8 *New Metaphysicals*

10/19 Introduction

10/21 Shamans in the Meeting House

10/23 Becoming Mystics

Week 9: *New Metaphysicals*

10/26 Tuning the Body

**Ethnography Project due**

10/28 Karmic Laundry

10/30 "Zooming Around"

**Section 3: secular state and the defining and governing of religious communities governance**

Week 10: Secular Governance and Freedom of Religion in the US

11/2: Sullivan, *Impossibility of Religious Freedom*, intro, 1

Last day to withdraw

11/4 Hoover, "Secular Law and the Realm of False Religion"

11/6 Johnson, "Courting Culture: Unexpected Relationships between Religion and Law in Contemporary Hawai'i"

Week 11: Governing Religion and the Secular in India, Sen *Articles of Faith*  
11/9: Introduction, Ch 1, “Defining Religion”  
11/11: chap 2, 3  
11/13: chap 4, 5

Week 12  
11/16: ch 6, 7  
11/18: ch 8  
11/20: Research Proposal Project due

[THANKSGIVING]

Week 13: Secular Law in and out of China/Grant Proposal Presentations  
11/30: Document 19, “the Abbot’s New House”  
12/2: Presentations  
12/4: Presentations

Week 14  
12/7: Presentations  
12/9 Last Class

Final Project rewrite and final paper due due Friday December 18 at noon.