

Religious Pluralism in the United States



Course Overview

The United States is arguably the most religiously diverse nation in the world, possessing a dizzying array of religious beliefs and behavior. And despite predictions to the contrary, levels of devout religious belief remain high, evidenced by recent controversies involving a proposed Islamic community center in Lower Manhattan, as well as Supreme Court rulings on same-sex marriage and female access to contraception. How do people—including nonbelievers—experience this religious multiplicity? How are these vast religious differences negotiated socially, culturally, politically, and legally? Moving beyond theology, this course will explore the broad concept of *lived religion* in the United States. Through readings in fiction, law, history, and sociology, we'll tackle these fundamental issues.

In this course, you'll write three essays, each of increasing complexity. In Unit 1, you'll write an argumentative essay using a single source, Ayad Akhtar's play, *Disgraced*. In Unit 2, we'll tackle constitutional questions of

religious freedom. You'll read a selection of opinions by legal theorists which you'll then use in an argumentative essay staking your own position. In Unit 3, you'll conduct research on a religious topic of your choosing and write a substantial paper using both primary and secondary sources.

Course Outline

Unit 1 (single-source essay, 4-6 pages)

In the first unit, we'll read Ayad Akhtar's 2013 Pulitzer Prize-winning drama, *Disgraced*. *Disgraced* premiered in Chicago before moving to New York City's Lincoln Center and, along with his debut novel, *American Dervish*, cemented Akhtar as a leading interpreter of the contemporary Muslim-American experience.

Your essay assignment is to craft a persuasive argument that addresses a compelling issue in the play. Your argument should be based on evidence you've gathered from *Disgraced*, including the lines, passages, and scenes you've been discussing in class and analyzing in your Response Papers. The Response Papers will help you build toward a successful essay. In the first, you'll generate an **analytical question** about a passage or scene in *Disgraced* which you found puzzling, intriguing, or otherwise thought-provoking. In the second Response Paper, you'll put forth an original **thesis** that in some way reconciles your analytical question. The work you do in these response papers will allow you to shape your argument into a coherent essay. You should aim to write for a reader who has at least some familiarity with the play, and your argument should help the reader realize a specific insight—your **argument**—about *Disgraced*. Also remember that you will need to delve into the complexities of the **evidence**—and that this **analysis** will require you to weigh **arguments** and **counterarguments** against one another.

Unit 2 (lens essay, 6-8 pages)

In our first unit we read *Disgraced*, a work of fiction which explored religion in interpersonal relationships among family, friends, and co-workers. In this unit, however, we'll telescope out and turn to broad questions about religion in public life. A contentious and seemingly ever-present quandary in American public life is the relationship between religion and government (often shortened to “church and state”). The First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution states “Congress shall make no law . . . prohibiting the free exercise” of religion. This may appear straightforward, but what exactly does it mean? Is the government universally prohibited from impinging upon a person's religious beliefs, worship, or actions? If not, when and to what extent may it? Likewise, might a person or religious body claim an exemption from an existing law on religious grounds?

In this unit we'll read several theories regarding the First Amendment and religious freedom. Your initial task is to master the **key terms** and positions argued by these legal scholars. You'll then employ these theories in analyzing recent legal cases involving religious freedom. In doing so, your assignment is to construct an original argument about the proper interpretation of the First Amendment. This is the essence of a **lens essay**, in which you'll apply general theories to specific and detailed examples.

Unit 3 (research essay, 8-10 pages)

For the final unit, you'll write a research paper. Although all paper topics must be approved by me, you'll have quite a bit of latitude to follow your own interests. As long as it in some way explores religion in America, your research paper may focus on history, sociology, literature, current events and public policy, etc. (don't worry if you're uncertain about a topic; we'll work together to narrow one down!). The essay needs to put forth a well-argued thesis, supported convincingly by evidence drawn from both **primary and secondary sources**.

The Writing Process (the sequence for all three units)

1. Response Papers: Before drafting each essay, you will complete one or more response papers that focus on particular writing skills important for the relevant essay type.
2. Drafts: You will submit a draft of each of the three essays and I will give you detailed comments. My comments are not simply a checklist to transform your draft into an A revision. As you revise your draft, you'll need to rethink your argument, as well as how to deal with new challenges and opportunities that present themselves. Because
3. Draft Workshops: Immediately after each draft is due, we'll have an in-class draft workshop in which you will work through one or two student papers. You will offer the writer(s) constructive criticism and suggestions for improvement. You will submit written comments for both drafts.
4. Draft Conferences: After I've carefully read your draft, we'll meet for a conference: 20 minutes for individual conferences in Units 1 and 2 and 60 minutes for small-group conferences in Unit 3. We'll go over my comments on your draft. This is an opportunity to devise strategies for revising the essay, so come to the conference ready to take the lead! Take notes in conference!
5. Final Revisions: You should expect to extensively revise each of your drafts before submitting it for a grade. I will provide written comments on essay revisions with the aim of helping you work through future assignments. We are on a very tight schedule so it is imperative that you submit work on time.

Submitting Electronic Files: All written work must be in Microsoft Word; your file should end in .doc or .docx. It should be double-spaced in Times New Roman or Garamond (or equivalently sized and readable) 12-point font with standard margins (one inch on all sides). Essay drafts and revisions will be submitted electronically to the appropriate drop box on our course website. It is also your responsibility to ensure that the file you are sending is not corrupted or damaged. If I cannot open or read the file you have sent, the essay will be subject to a late penalty.

All work you submit is for public readership – in other words, we will use essays and excerpts from the writers in the class (possibly yours!) as some of our texts this semester. If at any point you submit a draft or revision that you would prefer other students not read, please let me know that—but please don't make that request about everything you turn in this semester.

Deadlines: For many class meetings, you will have due a response paper or some other reading or writing exercise to help you develop the essay for that unit. Our work together in class will also often be based on those assignments. For those reasons, it is imperative that you turn your work in on time. Of course, even in the most carefully organized semesters, unexpected circumstances can arise – therefore each student in this section is allowed ONE 24-hour “wildcard” extension on a response paper, draft, or revision during the semester.

(Exception: the 24-hour extension may not be used for the Essay 3 revision, because I'm up against a firm deadline to submit final course grades to the registrar.)

To use that 24-hour extension without penalty, you must: contact me *before* that deadline; submit the late work to the drop box; and be on time with the other work due on that day as well. Otherwise, the work will be counted as late. And beware: taking that one-day extension can mean that you're crunched for time at the beginning of the next unit. Other than this “wild card” extension, all deadlines in the course are firm. Except in the case of medical or family emergency, I do not grant further extensions. Essay drafts or revisions turned in after the deadline will be penalized a third of a letter-grade on the final essay for each day they are late. If you cannot meet a deadline due to a medical emergency, you must contact me right away, and may be required to

produce a note from UHS; in the event of a family emergency, you must contact me right away, and may be required to ask your dean to contact me by e-mail or phone. In addition, please contact me as soon as possible so we can work out an alternative schedule.

Assignment due dates

Here are the major due dates for the semester:

Essay 1 revision: Pending
 Essay 2 revision: Pending
 Essay 3 revision: Pending

Please plan to remain on campus through Reading Period, as we'll meet then for group draft conferences.

Getting Help

Office Hours: I will be available in my office (One Bow Street, Office 229) on **Tuesdays, 2:30-4:30pm and by appointment**. Office hours are a time to come and ask questions, talk about your work in the class, and get help specific to your individual process as a thinker and a writer. I am always happy to meet with you to discuss both your progress and your concerns.

Writing Center: At any stage of the writing process – while brainstorming ideas, reviewing drafts, approaching revisions – you may find yourself wanting help with your essays beyond what I provide in comments and conferences and what your peers provide in workshops. The Writing Center (located on the garden level of the Barker Center, telephone 617-495-1655) offers hour-long appointments with trained tutors. These tutors provide a valuable service: any piece of writing benefits from further review and a fresh perspective. Visit the Writing Center's web site at <http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~wricntr> to make an appointment.

Required Texts

The following materials are required for the course:

- Ayad Akhtar, *Disgraced* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2013). ISBN: 978-0-316-32446-5; you must have a print copy. It's available for purchase at the Harvard Coop.
- The readings for Units 2 & 3 will be on the course website (you must print them)
- *Harvard Guide to Using Sources*. It is available at <http://usingsources.fas.harvard.edu/icb/icb.do>
- In this course, we'll use the Chicago citation method. If you have any questions about how to cite materials, your first stop should be the *Chicago Manual of Style* at www.chicagomanualofstyle.org.

Course Policies

Grading

Grades are calculated according to the following formula:

Class Participation 10%
 Essay 1 25%
 Essay 2 30%
 Essay 3 35%

These grades will be based on the quality of your final essay for each unit. Grading becomes more stringent as we progress (since you are expected to have mastered certain skills and techniques). Please be advised that final grades (that is, grades on revised essays) are indeed final; I will not read or grade a further revision of a revision. My goal is to return your graded revision within two weeks of submission; regardless, you'll always receive your graded revision before the next draft is due.

Class Participation

Most of our time in class will be in a discussion or workshop format—which may include whole class, small group, or partner activities. As such, your participation in each class is vital to your success in the class and the success of the class as a whole. I value prepared and thoughtful contributions over sheer volume.

You may not use a laptop, tablet, or phone in class. Always bring print copies of readings to class.

Email

Rather than take up our class time with announcements and administrative arrangements (and there will be many of them), I'll use email to communicate most of that information. As part of your participation in the course, I ask that you check your Harvard email account daily; you are responsible for the information I post there. Likewise, I make sure to check mine once every weekday for questions from you. Please note that I don't check email later than 7:00 p.m. I can answer most questions within 24 hours, except over the weekend.

Attendance

Because Expos has a shorter semester and fewer class hours than other courses, and because instruction in Expos proceeds by sequential writing activities, your consistent attendance is essential. *If you are absent without medical excuse **more than twice**, you are eligible to be officially excluded from the course and given a failing grade.* On the occasion of your second unexcused absence, you will receive a letter warning you of your situation. This letter will also be sent to your Resident Dean, so the College can give you whatever supervision and support you need to complete the course.

Apart from religious holidays, only medical absences can be excused. In the case of a medical problem, you should contact your preceptor before the class to explain, but in any event within 24 hours: otherwise you will be required to provide a note from UHS or another medical official, or your Resident Dean. *Absences because of special events such as athletic meets, debates, conferences, and concerts are not excusable absences.* If such an event is very important to you, you may decide to take one of your two allowable unexcused absences; but again, you are expected to contact your preceptor beforehand if you will miss a class, or at least within 24 hours. If you wish to attend an event that will put you over the two-absence limit, you should contact your

Resident Dean and you must directly petition the Expository Writing Senior Preceptor, who will grant such petitions only in extraordinary circumstances and only when your work in the class has been exemplary.

Completion of Work

Because your Expos course is a planned sequence of writing, you must write all of the assigned essays to pass the course, and you must write them within the schedule of the course—not in the last few days of the semester after you have fallen behind. You will receive a letter reminding you of these requirements, therefore, if you fail to submit at least a substantial draft of an essay by the final due date in that essay unit. The letter will also specify the new date by which you must submit the late work, and be copied to your Resident Dean. *If you fail to submit at least a substantial draft of the essay by this new date, and you have not documented a medical problem, you are eligible to be officially excluded from the course and given a failing grade.*

Collaboration

The following kinds of collaboration are permitted in this course: developing or refining ideas in conversation with other students and through peer review of written work (including feedback from Writing Center tutors). If you would like to acknowledge the impact someone had on your essay, it is customary to do this in a footnote at the beginning of the paper. As stated in the *Student Handbook*, “Students need not acknowledge discussion with others of general approaches to the assignment or assistance with proofreading.” However, all work submitted for this course must be your own: in other words, writing response papers, drafts or revisions with other students is expressly forbidden.

Academic Integrity

Throughout the semester we’ll work on the proper use of sources, including how to cite and how to avoid plagiarism. You should always feel free to ask me questions about this material. All the work that you submit for this course must be your own, and that work should not make use of outside sources unless such sources are explicitly part of the assignment. Any student submitting plagiarized work is eligible to fail the course and to be subject to review by the Honor Council, including potential disciplinary action.