*Course Description:* Thomas Jefferson, author of the Declaration of Independence and third President of the United States, described Christianity as “the most sublime and benevolent, but most perverted system that ever shone on man.” Since Jesus’ “pure principles” had been “muffled by priests,” he said, we must return to the “simple evangelists,” the “unlettered apostles,” the “Christians of the first century,” indeed, to “the very words only of Jesus,” in order to restore Christianity to “the primitive simplicity of its founder.” Taking the “Jefferson Bible” as our stimulus and starting point, this course will explore the way religion has been constructed and construed since the beginnings of the common era. Select myths and practices from ancient Israel, Greece, Rome, and early Christianity will be the subject of comparative, historical investigation. Special attention will be given to how these traditions, taken together, produce religion as a discrete category of human experience.

*Course Requirements:*
1. Punctual attendance at every meeting of the class.
2. Careful preparation of the assigned readings prior to their discussion in class.
3. Informed, active participation in class discussions, worth 10% of your grade.
4. An essay (5-6 pp.) due online on Fri., Feb. 19, worth 25% of your grade.
5. An essay (5-6 pp.) due online on Fri., Mar. 25, worth 25% of your grade.
6. A final essay (10 pp.) due online on Wed., May 11, worth 40% of your grade.

*Required Textbook:*  

*Recommended Textbook:*  

*Note:* All other required readings on the syllabus will be available online.

**Syllabus**

1. Jan. 25  
   Introducing a Study of the History of Religion  
   *Thomas Jefferson’s letter (21 April 1803) to Benjamin Rush (Adams, Jefferson’s Extracts from the Gospels, 331):*  
   “In some of the delightful conversations with you, in the evenings of 1798.99, which served as an Anodyne to the afflications of the crisis through which our country was then labouring, the Christian religion was sometimes our topic: and I then promised
you that, one day or other, I would give you my views of it. They are the result of a
life of enquiry and reflection, and very different from that Anti-Christian system,
imputed to me by those who know nothing of my opinions. To the corruptions of
Christianity, I am indeed opposed; but not to the genuine precepts of Jesus himself. I
am a Christian, in the only sense in which he wished any one to be; sincerely
attached to his doctrines, in preference to all others; ascribing to himself every
human excellence, and believing he never claimed any other. At the short intervals,
since these conversations, when I could justifiably abstract my mind from public
affairs, this subject has been under my contemplation. But the more I considered it,
the more it expanded beyond the measure of either my time or information. In the
moment of my late departure from Monticello, I received (sic) from Doct. Priestly
(sic) his little treatise of ‘Socrates and Jesus compared.’ This being a section of the
general view I had taken of the field, it became a subject of reflection, while on the
road, and unoccupied otherwise. The result was, to arrange in my mind a Syllabus, or
Outline, of such an Estimate of the comparative merits of Christianity, as I wished to
see executed, by some one of more leisure and information for the task than myself.
This I now send you, as the only discharge of my promise I can probably ever
execute.’

2. Jan. 27    Comparing Religion: Ethics, Practice, Belief, Philosophy, or Superstition?
*Thomas Jefferson’s “Syllabus of an Estimate of the merit of the doctrines of Jesus,
compared with those of others” (Adams, Jefferson’s Extracts from the Gospels, 331-34)
*Hebrew Bible (www.biblestudytools.com/nrs):
   Exodus 20:2-17; 34:10-28; Deuteronomy 5:6-21 (the Decalogue)
   Deuteronomy 6:4-9; 11:13-21; Numbers 15:37-41 (the Shema)
   Numbers 28:1-8; Psalm 40:6-10 (Sacrifice)
*Plato, Apology 28D-30C (Barrett, New Testament Background, sec. 57)
*Theophrastus, Characters 16 (Grant, Hellenistic Religions, 72-73)
*Inscription from Priene, 9 BCE (Grant, Ancient Roman Religion, 173-74)

Part I: On Religion as Imaginative Labor and Social Identity

3. Feb. 1    Jewish Wisdom and the Hebrew Epic
*Old Testament Apocrypha (www.biblestudytools.com/apocrypha/nrsa):
*Burton L. Mack, “Sirach (Ecclesiasticus),” 65-86

4. Feb. 3    Ben Sira’s Hymn in Praise of the Fathers
*Burton L. Mack, “Sirach (Ecclesiasticus),” 65-86

Part II: On Religion as Philosophy and Social Ethics

5. Feb. 8    Philosophy as Piety
*Plato, Euthyphro (Tredennick and Tarrant, The Last Days of Socrates, 1-30, 207-13)
6. Feb. 10  Socrates on Trial

7. Feb. 15  Hellenistic Philosophy: Stoics

8. Feb. 17  Hellenistic Philosophy: Epicureans and Cynics
*Antisthenes (Diogenes Laertius 6.1-15 [Loeb Classical Library])
*Epictetus, *Discourses* 3.22 (Loeb Classical Library)

*Note: An essay (5-6 pp.) due online on Fri., Feb. 19*

Part III: On Religion as the Myth and Cultic Practices of the Mysteries

9. Feb. 22  The Eleusinian Mysteries
*Homeric Hymn to Demeter* (Rice and Stambaugh, *Sources for the Study of Greek Religion*, 171-83)
*Luther H. Martin, *Hellenistic Religions*, 58-72

10. Feb. 24  Dionysus and Greek Myth
*Euripides, *The Bacchae* (Kirk, *The Bacchae of Euripides*)

11. Feb. 29  Dionysus and Greek Religion
*Euripides, *The Bacchae* (Kirk, *The Bacchae of Euripides*)

12. Mar. 2  The Mysteries of Dionysus
*The Senate decree concerning the Bacchanalia, 186 BCE (Grant, *Ancient Roman Religion*, 54-56)
*Luther H. Martin, *Hellenistic Religions*, 90-98

*Spring Break*

13. Mar. 21  The Mysteries of Isis
*Luther H. Martin, *Hellenistic Religions*, 16-19, 21-29
14. Mar. 23  The Myth of Isis and Osiris
*Papyrus Oxyrhynchus 11.1380 (Grant, *Hellenistic Religions*, 128-30)
*Diodorus of Sicily, *Library of History* 1.27.3-6 (Grant, *Hellenistic Religions*, 130-31)
*Isis aretalogy from Cyme (Grant, *Hellenistic Religions*, 131-33)
*Luther H. Martin, *Hellenistic Religions*, 72-81

*Note: An essay (5-6 pp.) due online on Fri., Mar. 25*

15. Mar. 28  The Mysteries of Cybele and Attis
*Arnobius of Sicca, *The Case against the Pagans* 5.5-7, 16-17 (Meyer, *The Ancient Mysteries*, 116-20)
*Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 7.17.9-12 (Loeb Classical Library)
*Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities* 2.19.3-5 (Beard, North, and Price, *Religions of Rome II*:8.7a; cf. II:5.6a)
*Prudentius, *Crowns of Martyrdom* 10.1001-50 (Beard, North, and Price, *Religions of Rome II*:6.7a-b)

Part IV: On Religion as a Mode of Comparison

16. Mar. 30  On Comparison

17. Apr. 4  On Comparing Words
*Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine*, 54-84

18. Apr. 6  On Comparing Stories

19. Apr. 11  On Comparing Settings
*Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine*, 116-43
*Graydon F. Snyder, *Ante Pacem: Archaeological Evidence of Church Life before Constantine*, plates 1, 6, 9, 30, 33
Part V: On Religion as Cultural Critique

21. Apr. 18 On Sacrifice as the Most Visible Religious Practice in Ancient Religion
*The stages of sacrifice (Beard, North, and Price, *Religions of Rome* II:6.1)
*The Altar of Peace at Rome (Beard, North, and Price, *Religions of Rome* II:4.3)

22. Apr. 20 On the Christians’ Redefinition of Sacrifice

23. Apr. 25 On the Christians’ Rejection of Sacrifice
*The Epistle of Barnabas* (Staniforth and Louth, *Early Christian Writings*, 155-84)

24. Apr. 27 On the Christians’ Refusal to Sacrifice
*Pliny, Epistle to Trajan* 10.96-97 (Radice, *The Letters of the Younger Pliny*, 293-95)
*Martyrdom of Saints Perpetua and Felicitas* 6 (Beard, North, and Price, *Religions of Rome* II:6.8b)
*A certificate of sacrifice, 250 CE (Beard, North, and Price, *Religions of Rome* II:6.8c)
*Theodosian Code* 16.10.12 (Beard, North, and Price, *Religions of Rome* II:11.14)

Part VI: On “Judaism,” “Heresy,” and the Invention of “Christianity” as Religion

25. May 2 On Claiming the Hebrew Epic for Christianity
*Justin, *1 Apology* (Richardson, *Early Christian Fathers*, 242-89)

26. May 4 On the Partition of Judeo-Christianity
*Note: A final essay (10 pp.) due online on Wed., May 11*