In 2015, Dr. Suzanne Henderson participated in a Teaching Interfaith Understanding faculty development seminar, run in partnership between the Council of Independent Colleges and Interfaith Youth Core, and generously funded by the Henry Luce Foundation. For information on future seminars, and to access more resources created by seminar alumni, visit https://www.ifyc.org/content/ifyc-cic-resources.

Course Description

This course introduces students to the study of world religions in cultural and historical contexts and introduces the multi-faceted role of religion in our world by examining social, economic, historical, political, and ethical issues. In addition, we will emphasize first-hand accounts of religious experience against the backdrop of the traditions' historical origins.

We inhabit an increasingly diverse world, living and working among those devoted to a wide range of faith traditions—or lack thereof. This course will help us understand our neighbors on their own terms and foster respect for the values embedded in differing traditions. At the same time, we’re keenly aware of the impact of religiously-motivated violence and hatred both at home and abroad. As a result, this course will explore the connections between religion and state-sanctioned power. Finally, by encountering others’ religious traditions, we’ll reflect on our own ways of making meaning.
Course Goals
Over the course of this semester, students in this course will learn to:

- Participate in a learning community characterized by inquiry, respect, and commitment;
- Explain concepts, figures, and historical events that are central to a range of religious and philosophical traditions;
- Recognize both similarity and difference across these traditions, as well as their historical relationships to one another;
- Engage in meaningful dialogue with those who identify with a different religious or philosophical tradition;
- Articulate the importance of interfaith understanding as a practical “life skill” (in professional, civic, or social settings); and
- Express with precision and depth their own religious or philosophical identity and its relationship to other ways of self-identifying.

Required Texts

- Various articles and excerpts, linked on MyCourses (our course website)
- Various websites, linked on MyCourses. A few reliable and helpful websites include the following:
  - Virtual Religion Index: [http://virtualreligion.net/vri/](http://virtualreligion.net/vri/)
  - Academic Info on Religion and Theology: [http://www.academicinfo.net/religindex.html](http://www.academicinfo.net/religindex.html)
  - The Pluralism Project at Harvard University: [http://www.pluralism.org/](http://www.pluralism.org/)
  - On Being: [http://www.onbeing.org/programs/2012#programArchiveBottomNav](http://www.onbeing.org/programs/2012#programArchiveBottomNav)

Course Assignments and Grading

- Participation and Professionalism (10%): In order for you to succeed in this course, you must come to class consistently, promptly, with all relevant materials, having noted/underlined/commented on the day’s readings, and ready to participate in this discussion-based class.
- Content Quizzes (15%): Each week, you’ll take an open-book, open-note quiz on the assigned readings.
- Reflection Journal (15%): Over the course of the semester, you’ll post weekly responses (200-300 words each) to a variety of assigned activities. As part of your final exam, you’ll compile a portfolio, along with a cover letter explaining the value of what you’ve learned in the course. See Appendix I for reflection journal guidelines.
Showing What You Know (40%): A midterm (15%) and a cumulative final exam (25%) will provide an opportunity to demonstrate your growing knowledge about the religious traditions we explore. *See Appendices II and III for midterm and final exam prompts.*

Final Project (20%): You’ll conduct and submit field research on the value of interfaith literacy and skills for meaningful dialogue across religious difference. *See Appendix IV for final project guidelines.*

**COURSE SCHEDULE**

*Class meets once per week.*

**Course Introduction**

**Week 1: Welcome and Introduction**
- Eboo Patel, *Pluralism in a Democracy*
- Stephen Prothero, *All Religions are Not the Same*
- Due on Sunday: Reflection Journal 1

**Indigenous Religions**

**Week 2: What is “sacred”?”**
- Before class: Read Fisher, ch. 1-2
- In class: Content Quiz 1 (one page of notes/chapter)
- Watch *Wiping the Tears of Seven Generations*
- Read “Why the Sioux are Refusing $1.3 Billion”
- Read “‘Our Cause is Just’ Says Tribal Leader in Pipeline Protest”
- Read *TED Talk: America’s Native Prisoners of War*
- Read *12 Ways to Support the Dakota Pipeline Protesters*
- Due on Sunday: Reflection Journal 2

**Judaism**

**Week 3: What is a “covenant”?**
- Before class: Read Fisher, ch. 8
- In class: Content Quiz 2 (two pages of notes)
- Optional: Visit a synagogue
- Due on Sunday: Reflection Journal 3
Week 4: No class meeting: start on Final Project
- Due on Sunday: Final Project Proposal
- Optional: Visit a synagogue
- Watch Judaism: My Life, My Religion segment on Jerusalem/Shabbat (beginning at 5:18)
- Watch: Judaism: My Life, My Religion segment on Rosh Hashana/Yom Kippur (beginning at 25:15)

Week 5: The question of the “promised land”
- Before class: Read “The Promised Land” (linked on MyCourses)
- In class: Content Quiz 3 (one page of notes)
- Optional: Visit a synagogue
- Watch: My Neighbourhood
- Due on Sunday: Reflection Journal 4

Christianity

Week 6: What is a “messiah”?
- Before class: Read Fisher, ch. 8
- In class: Content Quiz 4 (two pages of notes)
- Optional: Attend Greek Orthodox or Mormon worship
- Due on Sunday: Reflection Journal 5

Week 7: The question of church and state
- Before class: Listen to Faith Factor podcasts (on Trump and Clinton)
- In class: Content Quiz 5 (two pages of notes)
- Due on Sunday: Reflection Journal 6

Islam

Week 8: What is “submission”?
- Before class: Read Fisher, ch. 10
- In class: Content Quiz 6 (two pages of notes)
- Optional: Visit a mosque
- Due on Sunday: Reflection Journal 7
Week 9: The question of the caliphate
- Before class: Read “The Atlantic Ignores Muslim Intellectuals, Defines “True Islam” as ISIS” and “Open Letter to Al-Baghdadi”
- In class: Content Quiz 7 (two pages of notes)
- Follow up: Reflection Journal 8 (due: Sunday, 10/30)

Week 10: Midterm Exam
- Part One: Explorations (50%): complete outside of class and bring to exam
- Part Two: Identify and Explain (50%): in-class; closed book/notes; based on Content Quizzes

Hinduism

Week 11: What is “sanatana dharma”? 
- Before class: Read Fisher, ch. 3
- In class: Content Quiz 8 (three pages of notes)
- Optional: Visit Hindu temple
- Due on Sunday: Reflection Journal 9

Week 12: The question of Hindu-ness
- Before class: Read “Modi’s India”
- In class: Content Quiz 9 (one page of notes)
- Watch Hinduism: My Life, My Religion and Bhagavad Gita videos
- Due on Sunday: Reflection Journal 10

Buddhism

Week 13: What is “awakening”? 
- Before class: Read Fisher, ch. 4
- In class: Content Quiz 10 (two pages of notes)
- Optional: Visit Buddhist gathering
- Due on Sunday: Reflection Journal 11

Week 14: The question of militant monks
- Before class: Read articles “The Face of Buddhist Terror” and “Sri Lanka’s Violent Buddhists”
- In class: Content Quiz 11 (two pages of notes)
Week 15: Final Exam

The Final Exam will include the following:

- 50% Closed-book and closed-note Content Exam (in class)
- 25% Explorations (see assignment below)
- Final Project Due at Assigned Exam Time
Appendix I: Reflection Journal Assignments

Reflection Journal 1:
In a carefully crafted paragraph or two, please reflect on our opening class, citing details from the videos and our discussion. Please consider any or all of the following questions:

- What did you observe in class that surprised you?
- What did you observe that inspired you?
- What did you observe that made you glad you’re in this class?
- How did the classroom conversation extend beyond its walls?
- What troubled you or raised important questions?

Reflection Journal 2:
Please read the Introduction and ch. 1-4 in My Neighbor’s Faith. Then, respond here in one or two paragraphs to the reading, keeping these questions in mind:

- What did you read that surprised or inspired you?
- What troubled you or raised important questions?
- How did the reading connect with your own experience?

Reflection Journals 3-11:
For this journal entry, choose one of these two options:

1. If you visit a Jewish [or designated religious tradition] service, please reflect on that visit, providing as many details as possible about your observations and insights about the contemporary practice of Judaism. Be sure to connect at least three details to what we’ve learned in class.

2. Read at least four encounters from My Neighbor’s Faith that feature interaction with Judaism [or designated religious tradition]. (You’ll need to skim the chapters to identify conversations that fit this tradition.) Reflect in detail on what you learn from those encounters, citing passages (with page numbers) to illustrate particular claims.

For each of these assignments, aim for a writing voice that fits an “academic conversation”: informed, respectful, honest, curious. Grammar, mechanics, and writing style count in your grade, so feel free to use MS Word’s tool to help with these!

Preparing for Site Visits:
As you prepare to visit a worship site, please take note the following “best practices:”

1. CALL FIRST! Explain what you are doing and ask if you may come for a visit. Some worship services are not open to people who are not members of the faith. Some are only for men or only for women. Some are at a different site than the main worship space. Some prefer to have you meet one of their representatives when you visit.
2. Find out what will be expected of you. Will you need to plan on removing shoes or covering your hair? Will you be expected to sing or speak? Do you need to sit in a particular part of the worship space?

3. Do your research. Learn as much as you can about the religious tradition you are observing, and the particular event you are attending. The more you know ahead of time, the less confusing or surprising certain elements of the experience will be.

4. BE ON TIME. It is disruptive, and it reflects poorly on you, on non-members of their faith, and on Queens if you are late to the service.

5. Talk to people. Ask to speak to the worship leader, if you can, or chat with other members of the community. Ask questions. If there is a social event before or after the service, go to it. Have a doughnut. Take the opportunity to learn more about the experience. Ask questions about anything you don’t understand. Listen more than you talk.

6. Participate, don’t simply observe. If everyone stands (or sits or kneels), you should, too. (This doesn’t mean you’re subscribing to the featured religion; it simply implies respect.)

7. Do not take pictures unless someone has given you explicit permission to do so.

8. Enjoy yourself! Take the opportunity to experience something new.
Appendix II: Midterm Exam Explorations Prompt

So far this semester, our study has helped to complicate, personalize, and politicize our understanding of the faith traditions we’ve encountered. As we pause at mid-term, we’ll explore some of the issues and themes raised in class at a deeper level. These “explorations” will comprise 50% of your midterm exam grade. Please read the following prompts carefully, taking time to make sure you understand the assignment and its expectations. Everyone will complete two explorations; the first involves a choice; the second is required of all students.

Exploration One: Please choose one of the following options.

1. Choose one socio-political issue considered in class and explore its relationship to two of the faith traditions we’ve studied. Examples might include: the role of women/gender; the interplay between religion and contemporary society; the use of religious violence; the political use of (interpretation of) scriptures. Using both resources from class and other resources you find, write a five-paragraph essay that addresses these questions:
   - What do you now understand differently, or perhaps more deeply, about the issue?
   - What specific examples illustrate what you’ve learned?
   - What questions remain that you’d explore if you had more time?

2. Listen to one On Being podcast discussion that relates to one of the faith traditions we’ve explored. Then, imagine that Krista Tippett is interviewing YOU. She begins, as she always does, with a question about your own spiritual or religious roots and worldview. Tell your own faith story in written, audio, or video form, using as many of the categories of religious study as seems fitting (see notes from the first class and/or the introductory chapter in your textbook). As you write your own story, keep these questions in mind:
   - Who or what have been the most important influences on your own faith story?
   - Can you identify any turning points—dramatic or subtle—when you began to see the world in a different light?
   - How does your own faith story connect to (or differ from) the faith story of others in your religious tradition?
   - What questions has the study of other religious traditions raised for you about your own?

** Note: Your “faith story” can, of course, be a “non-faith story.”
Appendix III: Final Exam Explorations Prompts

As we review the semester’s journey, we’ll take time to reflect on what we've learned, why it’s important, and how we’ll carry it forward. These “explorations” will comprise 50% of your final exam grade. Please read the following prompts carefully, taking time to make sure you understand the assignment and its expectations. Everyone will complete two explorations; the first involves a choice; the second is required of all students.

Exploration One: Please choose one of the following options. Either should be about five paragraphs.

1. At a holiday gathering, a family member asks about the courses you’ve just completed at Queens. When you mention this class, the relative responds with interest (either positive or negative). This essay will report a (hypothetical) conversation in which you offer specific reflections on what you learned and why the course is important. Remember, avoid broad generalization; go for description, details, and analysis. Use supporting evidence to illustrate your claims.

2. Revisit Standing Rock. Read up on what’s happened since the beginning of the semester. Connect the developments to our study of other religions and their relationship to culture and political power. What role has religion played in the political and commercial interests of the respective parties there? How does our study of religions of the world--in their global contexts--deepen your understanding of the Sioux at Standing Rock?

3. Read about a recent incident at a non-denominational church in New York state: [link]

Then, please write a letter to the church leaders, responding to this incident. Your piece might include such points as these: the benefit of interfaith worship experiences; the opportunity the church leaders have to educate members on Islam; any aspects of Islam you’d like them to understand and relay. You might re-watch Eboo Patel’s talk from our opening week to help strengthen your response.

For full credit, please indicate that you have sent the message (look online for their “contact us” information).

Exploration Two: Explore a question we did not consider in this class, and write a five-paragraph essay about it (include sources; be sure NOT to copy and paste your essay). You might investigate a religious tradition we didn’t have time to consider; you might explore a question about religion and culture that we only briefly mentioned; you might tackle a question that’s become highly relevant in our shifting political landscape. Be creative, relevant, authentic, and curious.
Appendix IV: Final Project Assignment – Pluralism in the Real World

Objective: This assignment explores the real-life application of our course, across a range of sectors in society.

Here are the steps you’ll take as you engage this question:

Proposal:

1. Choose a “social network” in your life that features some religious diversity and that functions together as a unit toward some wider purpose. This could be a workplace, a neighborhood, a social or political organization, a club, etc. You must be able to interview ten representatives of the network to complete the assignment.

2. Write a 300-500 word detailed description of the group that documents its diversity and its shared mission. Include a brief description of your initial impression of the role religious diversity plays in the group.

3. Create your own survey of about ten questions that explore the following general topics:
   - Members’ awareness of religious diversity within the group
   - Members’ assumptions (preconceived views) of others’ (different) religious views
   - Any meaningful interaction about religion that’s taken place
   - Any problems created by religious difference within the network
   - Any strategies or systems or codes of behavior in place that address religious diversity
   - Members’ interest in gaining knowledge and skills related to interfaith relationships

Mid-Term Check In (part of the Midterm Exam):

1. Summarize your progress on identifying a focus group. Include any shifts/changes in plan that you’ve had along the way. At this point, you should be poised to begin interviewing, if you haven’t already.

2. Provide details about the where/when/how of your interviewing process. This can be a description of what you’ve already done or a specific plan (with dates) about how you’ll proceed.

3. In addition to the common questions listed above, include at least three questions that are specific to your focus group. Your questions should avoid simply re-stating the common questions. Think carefully about the specific environment/community and the value and/or obstacles inherent in interfaith interactions.

Final Project (due at Final Exam):

1. Provide a profile of your interviewees. Do NOT share names or personal information that identifies them; instead use details that capture their life situation.

2. Write a three- to five-page synopsis of your findings that identifies important themes that emerge about both the value and obstacles to interfaith literacy and interaction in the setting you explored. Conclude with one to three recommendations for “next steps” in this group.

3. Include a one-page reflection on your own growth through this experience. What did you have to overcome? How did you do so? What did you gain?