

### **THEO 589: ENGAGING WORLD RELIGIONS COMPARATIVELY**

*Meeting Time:* Thursdays, 4:30pm–7:30pm MST/5:30pm–8:30pm CST/6:30pm–9:30pm EST  
(NB: We are running this class in three different time zones, so follow accordingly!)

*Dates:* March 21, March 28, April 4, April 11, April 25, May 2 (NB: 4/18 is Holy Thursday, no class)

*Location:* Online

#### **Instructor**

Mara Brecht, Ph.D.  
Phone: 724–875–2788 (text or call)  
Email: [mara.brecht@snc.edu](mailto:mara.brecht@snc.edu)  
Google Hangout Office Hours: by appointment

#### **Course Description**

*Nostra Aetate* calls for the Church to “recognize, preserve and promote the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values” of the many faith traditions of the world and, specifically, to do so “through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions.” Moving from this directive, this course holds that studying non-Christian faith traditions can enable deepened understanding of and appreciation for the Christian tradition. Students will gain familiarity with specific aspects of Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and indigenous traditions by placing these traditions in conversation with specific aspects of Christianity. Through this scholarly dialogue with diverse traditions, students will develop their own theological commitments. Students will also reflect critically on the methods and resources used in comparative theological engagement.

#### **Required Course Texts**

- Steven Prothero’s *God is Not One* (HarperOne, 2010): available in print or on Kindle

As a graduate level seminar, this course is reading-intensive. Thoughtful and engaged reading is ***critical*** to success in this course. Students will be expected to prepare reading carefully before class; students should have assigned readings, as well as their notes on the readings, accessible during our class meeting.

Assigned readings are noted under the *Reading* header on the Course Calendar & Schedule of Assignments. Besides the Prothero book, there are no books for this class. We will be reading only digital selections of books and articles (all of which will be posted to Google classroom).

#### **Course Objectives**

By the end of the semester, students will be able to:

1. ...speak about “comparative theology” as a method for learning about religious traditions;
2. ...identify beliefs, practices, and theological commitments of Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and indigenous religions;
3. ...draw comparisons between Christian and non-Christian beliefs, practices, and theological commitments;

4. ...articulate a theological and/or scholarly statement on the promises and limits of comparative engagement.

### Evaluation

Description	Related Objectives
<p><b>Participation (20%)</b> The success of this course will greatly depend on your active participation. You are expected to attend class faithfully, and to come to class fully prepared and ready to engage in conversation about the material. You should be able to answer and ask questions about the assigned readings, and to make regular and meaningful contributions to seminar-style discussions (including questions, comments, evaluations) <i>based primarily on assigned readings</i>. The response papers will help you prepare to be an effective participant in conversation.</p>	#1–3
<p><b>Response Papers (30%= 6%/paper x 5 papers)</b> For Class Meetings 2–6, you will be required to submit a short paper (of approximately 2–3 pages in length that is part summary and part analysis. Further instructions on the response papers is at the end of this syllabus.</p>	#2–3
<p><b>Prothero Notes (15%)</b> Due either Class Meeting 1 (3/21) or Class Meeting 6 (5/2), you will submit notes on the Prothero chapters. Further instructions on the Prothero notes is at the end of this syllabus.</p>	#2
<p><b>Take-Home Exam (15%)</b></p>	#1, 3
<p><b>Final Position Paper (20%)</b> As a way to wrap up your learning in this course, you will write a short, reflective essay (approximately 3–4) pages discussing the promise and limits of comparative theological engagement for Christian faith and practice. Further instructions on the position paper to come.</p>	#4

The learning process succeeds only when students perform honestly on assignments and examinations. All students are expected to abide by the Academic Honor Code. It defines academic dishonesty and sets forth the responsibilities of faculty and students in the event of alleged dishonesty. Possible penalties for dishonesty include reduction of a grade, failure in the course, failure and suspension, or failure and dismissal. Please refer to the current *St. Norbert College Student Handbook* for the text of the Academic Honor Code.

“In keeping with the St. Norbert College mission to help students develop their full potential, and in compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act, the College provides supportive services to students with disabilities. For enquiries and further details, please visit the Academic Support Services Office located in Todd Wehr Hall, Room 211, call at 403-1321, or visit the website [www.snc.edu/academicsupport/disabilities.html](http://www.snc.edu/academicsupport/disabilities.html).”

## COURSE CALENDAR & SCHEDULE OF ASSIGNMENTS

- Assignments should be completed as noted on the syllabus.
- Please have all assigned readings accessible for class discussion.

### Pre-Class Work

#### Preparing for the Semester

##### ***Pre-Assessment Reflection***

Before doing any reading for this course, please write answers to the following questions. After you finish writing and polishing, set your writing aside and make no further changes to them. You'll submit the Pre-Assessment Survey on or before the first day of class, Thu. 3/21.

1. What is a religion?
2. What are the best ways to learn about religions you are not a part of?
3. What role (if any) should non-Christian religious traditions play in the theological imaginations of Christians?

\*There aren't "right" answers to these questions! They present opportunities for you to reflect and think through your own ideas.

##### ***Getting an Overview***

You are required to read the bulk of Prothero's *God is Not One* for this class. It looks like a lot of reading, but it's very accessible and enjoyable. My strong recommendation (if your life allows!) is that you do the reading ahead of time as a primer for the course. If this isn't possible for you, I've noted below the meetings and dates associated with the chapters. Please read instructions for Prothero Notes assignment (at the end of this syllabus) \*before\* beginning your reading.

##### *Reading:*

- Introduction, pp. 1–24 (Meeting 1, 3/21)
- Ch. 1: Islam: The Way of Submission, pp. 25–64 (Meeting 2, 3/28)
- Ch. 4: Hinduism: The Way of Devotion, pp. 131–168 (Meeting 3, 4/8)
- Ch. 7: Judaism: The Way of Exile and Return, pp. 243–278 (Meeting 4, 4/11)
- Ch. 5: Buddhism: The Way of Awakening, pp. 169–202 (Meeting 5, 4/25)
- Optional but recommended! \*\*Ch. 2: Christianity: The Way of Salvation, pp. 65–100\*\*

\*Prothero Notes: If you complete *God is Not One* before the class begins, please submit this assignment at our first meeting 3/21. If you read *Gods is Not One* during the semester, your assignment will be due at our last meeting 5/2.

### Meeting 1

#### Engaging Religions Comparatively

Thu. 3/21

The goal for this meeting is to ask some "big questions" about engaging the diverse religions of the world. We will ask methodological questions: *What does it mean to engage religions comparatively?* Theological questions: *What theological "good" comes from comparative engagement?* And critical questions: *What assumptions are embedded in exploring religions in this way?*

	<p><i>Reading:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Nostra Aetate: Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religion</i></li> <li>• F. Clooney, "Religious Diversity and Comparative Theology," pp. 3–23</li> <li>• B. Nongbri, "Introduction" pp. 1–8 (only read to the top of p. 8)</li> <li>• B. Nongbri, "What Do We Mean by Religion?" pp. 15–24</li> </ul> <p><i>Assignment Due:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pre-Assessment Reflection</li> <li>• Prothero Notes** (if you've completed <i>God is Not One</i>)</li> </ul>
<p><b>Meeting 2</b></p> <p>Thu. 3/28</p>	<p><b>Islam and Mary</b></p> <p>Honoring Mary is central to Muslim faith, as well as to (some) communities of Christians. How is Mary represented in the scriptures and tradition of each religion? Does she represent an opportunity for "harmony and collaboration" for Muslims and Christians?</p> <p><i>Reading:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• M. Ayoub, "The Need for Harmony and Collaboration between Muslims and Christians," pp. 9–16</li> <li>• R. George-Tvrtkovic, "Scriptural Prelude," pp. <u>TBD</u></li> </ul> <p><i>Assignment Due:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Response Paper 1</li> </ul>
<p><b>Meeting 3</b></p> <p>Thu. 4/8</p>	<p><b>Hinduism and the Embodied, Plural Nature of God</b></p> <p>Themes of divine plurality and incarnation are resonant in both Hindu and Christian theology. How does each tradition understand God as "many" and God as embodied? What are the points of convergence and departure? To what extent do Hindu conceptions challenge or deepen a Christian understanding?</p> <p><i>Reading:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• D. Eck, "The Names of God: The Meaning of God's Manyess," pp. 45–80</li> <li>• D. Eck, "The Faces of God: Discovering Incarnation in India," pp. 81–117</li> </ul> <p><i>Assignment Due:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Response Paper 2</li> </ul>
<p><b>Meeting 4</b></p> <p>Thu. 4/11</p>	<p><b>Judaism and the Way to God</b></p> <p>The goal of this meeting is work through the theologically thorny issue of how the Jewish and Christian communities relate to each other, addressing along the way themes of covenant, salvation, supercessionism, and messiahship.</p>

	<p><i>Reading:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• D. Novak, "What to Seek and What to Avoid in Jewish-Christian Dialogue," pp. 1–7</li> <li>• D. Novak, "From Supersessionism to Parallelism in Jewish-Christian Dialogue," pp. 8–25</li> <li>• M. Boys, "Does the Catholic Church have a Mission "to" Jews or "with" Jews," pp. 1–19</li> </ul> <p><i>Assignment Due:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Response Paper 3</li> </ul>
<p><b>Meeting 5</b></p> <p>Thu. 4/25</p>	<p><b>Buddhism and Emptiness as a Theological Category</b></p> <p>The goal of this meeting is learn about "emptiness" as a category of understanding in Buddhism and consider one Catholic theologian's use of emptiness as a way to deepen the idea of God's incomprehensibility.</p> <p><i>Reading:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• W. Rahula, "The Buddhist Attitude of Mind," pp. 1–15</li> <li>• J. Fredericks, "The Mind on Fire," pp. 51–71</li> <li>• J. Fredericks, "Buddhist Emptiness and the Incomprehensible God," pp. 72–95</li> </ul> <p><i>Assignment Due:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Response Paper 4</li> </ul>
<p><b>Meeting 6</b></p> <p>Thu. 5/2</p>	<p><b>Indigenous Practice and Christian Hospitality</b></p> <p><u>Theme TBD</u></p> <p><i>Reading:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <u>TBD</u></li> <li>• C. Pohl, "A New Look at an Old Tradition," pp. 3–15</li> </ul> <p><i>Assignment Due:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Response Paper 5</li> <li>• Prothero Notes** (if you haven't yet submitted)</li> </ul>
<p><b>Post-Class Work</b></p> <p>Sun. 5/12 by 11:59pm</p>	<p><b>Take-Home Exam and Final Position</b></p> <p><i>Assignment Due:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Take-Home Exam</li> <li>• Final Position Paper</li> </ul>

## **Assignment Guidelines**

- 1. Summary Papers**
- 2. Prothero Notes**