

# REL 300 Religion and News Media

Short Syllabus | March 11, 2016

Course Designer and Instructor: Debra L. Mason

## PURPOSE

---

The purpose of this course is to introduce a diverse group of graduate students to the challenges that the media present in communicating and engaging with belief within the context of the First Amendment and freedom of religion or belief.

## COMPETENCIES

---

In order to be an effective and authoritative religious leader in a diverse democracy, lay and ordained leaders must cultivate multiple competencies and literacies. This course will help students expand religious, media and digital literacies. These competencies will be measured via multimedia engagement, key readings, videoconferences, Socratic seminars, analysis (case studies), and media production.

1. *Religious literacy*: Students will expand their knowledge of the ways religion is digitally expressed and diverse religious perspectives, belief systems, and traditions. Students will learn to consider and analyze the ways that religious freedom is expressed in the public sphere via media. In a culture in which religious stereotypes and biases rage throughout social media, this course attempts to help students learn respectful means of encouraging civil discourse.
2. *Media literacy*: Students will gain knowledge about the First Amendment protections for freedom of speech, the nature of the modern media ecosystem, the history and trends of religion in the news, and media critiques of stories about religion. Media literacy is vital as students seek constructive ways to communicate differences in a democracy.
3. *Digital literacy*: Students will be exposed to the techniques of creating a website / blog, including best practices. Students will learn to respectfully debate those topics, form a coherent and convincing persuasive content, and students will ultimately develop their own unique voices and perspectives on these issues.

## TEACHING STYLE

---

This course seeks to incorporate varied ways of learning by requiring regular Badges, created in the course management software, and designed to apply creative interactivity in assessing comprehension and engagement with reading materials. In addition, regular blog posts will require analysis, engagement with readings, interactivity and response from classmates. The blog posts are labeled as such, rather than a discussion board, to get students familiar and comfortable as public intellectuals. Blog posts will become part of the final project, in which students all create a public web presence hosting selected blog content and other materials. Case studies will allow students to dig deep into one example, while drawing on the lessons and readings, and applying them in their analysis. Each Case Study assignment will have multiple options so that as students write them, everyone can have a unique one, and they will be shared as part of additional reading.

## ASSIGNMENTS

---

This course was designed with sensitivity to a variety of learning styles. The online and onsite sessions will include a combination of pedagogical techniques such as effective use of multimedia, such as writing blogs; compelling lectures from leading scholars; and meaningful videoconferences with a diverse peer group. The independent coursework will consist of reading and writing and engagement with the multimedia in the online classroom. The assignments will be weighted as follows:

- **The Four Case Studies (20%)** are used to measure a student's reading comprehension and written and analytical skills;
- **The Four Videoconferences (10%)** are intended to measure a student's integration of the subject matter with their ability to verbally engage in civil discourse in the videoconferences with colleagues and with high profile guests.
- **The Onsite Immersion (20%)** is designed to measure a student's participation and respectful engagement during the onsite conference in Washington, DC (attendance at and involvement in the required programs).
- **The Working Blog (50%):** We will practice being a public intellectual by creating a blog and posting content to it. We will all share in commenting on our colleague's blogs about their entries and in distributing via social media. (Half of the the "working blog" grade will be given to regular blog posts and the other half for the final result and total participation in social media and commenting.)

## Disciplined Engagement

Given the participatory nature of this curriculum, students are required to engage in all online and onsite sessions and videoconferences having previously completed the reading assignments and having taken notes. Students are required to come prepared for online and onsite discussions by maintaining a disciplined learning schedule. Students will be graded on their attendance and the quality of their participation in assignments.

### UNIT OVERVIEW

---

- Unit I.        **Religion News in Mass Media: From Hegemonic to Endangered species**
- The role of Providence
  - Bennett's innovation
  - The emerging professional journalist
  - Golden era of religion news
  - Declension in the industry
- Unit II.        **Foe, Friend or Frenemy? Organized Religion & Media**
- Audiences for religion news
  - Bridging the gap between people of faith and the media
  - Media watchdogs
- Unit III.       **First Amendment and the Intersection of Key Freedoms**
- Media law: What every person needs to know
  - Freedom of Religion & Freedom of Speech intersect
- Unit IV.       **Free Speech, Freedom of Religion and International Contexts**
- Indexing freedoms
  - Blasphemy laws / Hate speech
  - Charlie Hebdo. Danish cartoons. What is too far? Who decides?
- Unit V.        **Digital Religion and the Public Sphere**
- Best practices
  - The curse of comments & public shaming

## REL 300 COURSE CALENDAR

---

Introduction		<i>Example: Fall 2016</i>
Videoconference 1	Introductions, Expectations	Sept. 5, 2016
Unit I. Religion News in Mass Media		
Week 1. Online Block	Historical Contexts – Part I	Sept. 5–11, 2016
Week 2. Online Block	Historical Contexts – Part II	Sept. 12–18, 2016
Week 3. Online Block	Contemporary Contexts	Sept. 19–25, 2016
Unit II. Organized Religion & News		
Videoconference 2	Foe or Friend or Frenemy?	Sep 26, 2016
Week 4. Online Block	Bridging the Gap	Sept. 26–Oct. 2, 2016
Week 5. Online Block	Media Bias, Frames	Oct. 3–9, 2016
Week 6. Online Block	Media Watchdogs	Oct. 10–16, 2016
Unit III. Immersion in Washington, D.C.		
Onsite Session A	Small groups, meeting experts	M., Oct. 17, 12 p.m.
Onsite Session B	Public event	M., Oct. 17, 7 p.m.
Onsite Session C	DC tours	Tu., Oct. 18, 9 a.m.
Onsite Session D	Meeting experts	Tu., Oct. 18, 1 p.m.
Onsite Session E	Public event	Tu., Oct. 18, 7 p.m.
Onsite Session F	Small groups, processing	Tu., Oct. 18, 9 a.m.
Unit IV. Free Speech, Freedom of Religion and International Contexts		
Week 8. Online Block	Chilling effects; potential for harm?	Oct. 24–30, 2016
Week 9. Online Block	Charlie Hebdo, Danish cartoons	Oct. 31–Nov. 6, 2016
Week 10. Online Block	Digital Religion	Nov. 7–13, 2016
Unit V. Digital Religion and the Public Sphere		
Videoconference 3	Online religion, guest expert	Nov. 14, 2016
Week 11. Online Block	Advocacy journalism	Nov. 14–20, 2016
Week 12.	<i>Fall Break</i>	Nov. 21–27, 2016
Week 13. Online Block	Public shaming? Safe sanctuary guidelines	Nov. 28–Dec. 4, 2016
Week 14. Online Block	Writing Week	Dec. 5–11, 2016
Videoconference 4	Conclusions and Reflections	Dec. 12, 2016

## REQUIRED MATERIALS

---

### Books

1. *Journalism Next 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition* by Mark Briggs (Sage/CQ Press 2016). Be sure you have this version as previous editions are terribly outdated.
2. *Reporting on Religion: A Primer on Journalism's Best Beat*. Religion Newswriters Association.
3. *Reporting on Religion 2: A Stylebook on Journalism's Best Beat*. An independent supplement to *The Associated Press Stylebook*, a service of the Religion Newswriters Association.
4. ReligionStylebook.com (free)
5. ReligionLink.org (subscription)

### Course Packet

1. Readings on Religion as News (Buddenbaum & Mason)
2. *Freedom of Speech in the United States*, 6<sup>th</sup> Edition (2013) (T. Tedford & D. Herbeck)
3. *Christians, Free Expression, and the Common Good: Getting Beyond the Censorship Impulse* by Gordon S. Jackson (Lexington Books, 2015).

### Websites & Newsfeeds

1. Baptist Joint Committee: <http://bjconline.org>
2. HuffPost Religion: [www.huffingtonpost.com/religion](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/religion)
3. Get Religion: [www.patheos.com/blogs/getreligion](http://www.patheos.com/blogs/getreligion)
4. Law and Religion Headlines—International Center for Law and Religion Studies, Brigham Young University: [www.iclrs.org](http://www.iclrs.org)
5. The New York Times, Religion and Belief blog: [www.nytimes.com/topic/subject/religion-and-belief](http://www.nytimes.com/topic/subject/religion-and-belief)
6. OnBeing (Krista Tippett): [www.onbeing.org](http://www.onbeing.org)
7. The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, a Project of the Pew Research Center: [www.pewforum.org](http://www.pewforum.org)
8. Public Religion Research Institute (<http://publicreligion.org>) and “The Morning Buzz: News with a Shot of Data”
9. Religious Freedom in Focus newsletter of the Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Department of Justice.
10. Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly: [www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics](http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics)
11. Religion Clause: [www.religionclause.blogspot.com](http://www.religionclause.blogspot.com)
12. Religion Dispatches: <http://religiondispatches.org>
13. Religion News Blog: [www.religionnewsblog.com](http://www.religionnewsblog.com)
14. Religion News Service: [www.religionnews.com](http://www.religionnews.com)
15. Inside the First Amendment, articles by the Religious Freedom Center of the Newseum Institute (formerly the First Amendment Center): [www.religiousfreedomcenter.org](http://www.religiousfreedomcenter.org)
16. Washington Post “On Faith”

