

# CAS RN 400: WRITING RELIGION

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## In Workflow

1. CASRN Chair (mdeckel@bu.edu; dtmf@bu.edu)
2. CAS Dean (jbizup@bu.edu; dhealea@bu.edu; pgl@bu.edu; jessmroh; lcherch; chrisbra; casgecc@bu.edu)
3. GEC SubCommittees (scth@bu.edu)
4. University Gen Ed Committee Chair (scth@bu.edu; emgam@bu.edu; mtrevett@bu.edu; thegec@bu.edu)
5. Final Approval (scth@bu.edu; sjackson@bu.edu; ebloiz@bu.edu)

## Approval Path

1. Thu, 01 Mar 2018 21:43:17 GMT  
DAVID T. M. FRANKFURTER (dtmf): Approved for CASRN Chair

## New Proposal

Date Submitted: Thu, 01 Mar 2018 20:10:54 GMT

## Viewing: Writing Religion

Last edit: Thu, 01 Mar 2018 20:10:53 GMT

Changes proposed by: prothero

## Section 1 – Provenance of Proposal

### Proposer Information

Name	Title	Email	School/College	Department Name
STEPHEN R PROTHERO	Prof	prothero@bu.edu	CAS	Religion

## Section 2– Course or Co-Curricular Activity Identifiers – For Faculty Use

### What are you proposing?

Course

### College

College of Arts & Sciences

### Department

RELIGION

### Subject Code

CAS RN - Religion

### Course Number

400

### Course/Co-curricular Title

Writing Religion

### Short Title

WRITING RELIGIO

### This is:

A New Course

Did you participate in a CTL workshop for the development of this activity?

No

**Bulletin (40-word) Course Description**

A writing-intensive seminar focused on the close reading and careful writing on spirituality and religion in various non-fiction genres (memoir, Instagram essays, op-eds, academic articles). Possible authors: Ann Lamott, Jeff Sharlet, J. Z. Smith, Virginia Woolf, James Baldwin, Annie Dillard.

**Prerequisites, if any:**

RN 100 (or equivalent)

**Co-requisites, if any:**

**Courses or co-curriculars, if any, for which this course will be a prerequisite:**

**Courses or co-curriculars, if any, for which this course will be a co-requisite:**

**Cross-Listing**

**Course Type (for Scheduling Purposes):**

Independent (seminar or other course with no ancillary components)

**Delivery Type**

Face-to-Face

**Credits**

4

**Please justify this number of credits, with reference to BU's Policy on Credit Assignment and to the combination of required contact hours and student effort detailed in your proposed course syllabus.**

This course will meet 150 minutes/week and will include significant out-of-classroom efforts by students, both individually and in groups.

Is this course repeatable for additional credit?

No

**Section 3– Scheduling and Enrollment Information - For Department/School/College Use**

**Proposed first (or for existing course) next semester to be offered**

Spring 2019

**Proposed Last semester to be offered:**

Offer Indefinitely

Full semester course/activity?

Yes

**Course/Co-curricular Location**

Charles River Campus

**Course/Co-curricular offering pattern**

Every Spring

**What is your projected minimum capacity across all semesters and sections in an academic year?**

8

**What is your projected maximum capacity across all semesters and sections in an academic year?**

15

**Please explain the basis for anticipating this enrollment total**

Estimate is based on number of Religion concentrators plus general interest in Prof. Prothero's courses.

**Provide full detail if enrollment is expected to vary, for example, between Fall and Spring semesters**

Does this course/co-curricular have capacity for more students to enroll?

Yes

Do you propose to reserve seats for specific student populations?

No

## **Section 4 - General Education – For Faculty Use**

Are you proposing (only for freshmen entering BU before September 2018 and transfer students entering before September 2020) that this course/activity fulfill current general education requirements?

No

### **1. Philosophical, Aesthetic, and Historical Interpretation**

Aesthetic Exploration

#### **Aesthetic Outcome 1**

This course focuses on reading as well as writing, so students will come to know and appreciate non-fiction work by both contemporary authors and notable modern and post-modern figures.

#### **Aesthetic Outcome 2**

Close reading of texts is a major focus of the course. Students will also be required to "workshop" each other's work, and learn in the process both how to criticize and how to be criticized by others.

#### **Aesthetic Outcome 3**

Assignments include both personal and researched essays in a wide variety of non-fiction genres. Students will also read and have the opportunity to write in a variety of genres, including academic essays, Instagram essays, and memoir.

### **2. Scientific and Social Inquiry**

### **3. Quantitative Reasoning**

### **4. Diversity, Civic Engagement, and Global Citizenship**

Global Citizenship and Intercultural Literacy

#### **Global Outcome 1**

This course will include authors who are gay and straight, white and black, male and female. But the diversity featured here is first and foremost religious. We will read work by Catholics, Protestants, Muslims, Buddhists, and nonbelievers.

#### **Global Outcome 2**

n.a.

## 5. Communication

Writing-intensive Course

### Writing Intensive Outcome 1

Alongside the reading students will be doing in these various non-fiction genres, they will also be reading work about HOW to write. Anne Lamott's "Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life" is one of the required readings, but we will read other work by authors about how they research and draft and revise their work. Visiting practitioners of the writer's craft (both academics and otherwise) will also be featured in the class.

### Writing Intensive Outcome 2

Workshops will encourage students to read their classmates' work with understanding, engagement, appreciation, and critical judgment. But they will also teach students how to do just that. Moreover, we will be engaged in close readings of texts almost every day in class.

### Writing Intensive Outcome 3

Regular writing assignments, both in-class and out of class, both graded and ungraded, will teach students how to write clearly and coherently in a variety of genres. We will read at least one author of graphic novels and will study Instagram essays as well.

### Intellectual Toolkit

**How will you evaluate whether learning outcomes for the relevant area(s) have been met (e.g., exams/papers)? Please be explicit**

Largely through frequent writing assignments but also through in-class discussions.

## Educational Strategies

**What educational strategies do you plan to use to encourage student's full engagement in the course/co-curricular both inside and outside of classroom or activity space?**

Active learning, including brief in-class writing assignments, brainstorming, and workshoping. The course will also employ discussion-based teaching and learning.

## Section 5 - Relationship of Proposed Course to Existing Courses/Activities in Your Program or Others - For Department/School/College Use

Do you have Learning Objectives for this Course/Co-curricular in addition to BU Hub Outcomes?

No

**For what major(s) and/or minor(s) and/or concentration(s) will this course/activity fulfill program requirements?**

School/College	Degree Name	HEGIS Short Translation	Level
CAS	BA	Religion	Concentration

Is this course/activity required for any major or minor program?

No

Majors and minors and general education aside, are there other student populations in relevant departments for whom this course/co-curricular will serve as a valuable related elective?

Yes

**Which student populations?**

This course should also draw some interest from CAS students in the humanities and the social sciences, and from COM students interested in religion.

Overlap. Is there any significant overlap with courses/activities currently offered by your program or by others?

No

Sequencing. Aside from having or serving as a pre-requisite, does this course/co-curricular build on and/or lay groundwork for others?

Yes

**Please explain.**

This will serve as a capstone course for RN concentrators.

**Additional comments about the intended value and impact of this course/co-curricular:**

## **Section 6 – Resource Needs and Sustainability – For Department/School/College Use**

Facilities and equipment. Are any special facilities, equipment, and other resources needed to teach this course/activity?

No

Staffing. Will the staffing of this course, in terms of faculty and where relevant teaching fellows/assistants, etc., affect staffing support for other courses? For example, will other courses not be taught or be taught less frequently?

No

Budget and Cost. Will start-up and continuation of the course/activity entail costs not already discussed (e.g., transportation costs, lost wages, a criminal record check, etc.)? Does this experience require waivers of liability or background checks?

No

**Sustainability. Which members of your faculty or staff are prepared to teach this course/activity regularly or on a rotational basis? Please explain.**

Stephen Prothero at first, but we plan to bring in another professor among two or three who have also expressed interest.

## **Additional Notes on any Aspect of Course/Co-curricular**

### **Submit this form and course syllabus/co-curricular calendar.**

**Upload Syllabus/Calendar**

RN400SyllabusWritingReligion2.docx

**Reviewer Comments**

Key: 728

## CAS RN 400: WRITING RELIGION

Instructor: Stephen Prothero  
Office Location: 145 Bay State Road, 3rd Fl  
Contact Information: [prothero@bu.edu](mailto:prothero@bu.edu)  
Office Hours: TT 330-5, W 2-3

Spring 2018  
TT 2-315  
Course Credits: 4

"A writer is someone who spends years patiently trying to discover the second being inside him, and the world that makes him who he is." Orhan Pamuk, Nobel Lecture, 2006

### Course Description

People have been writing about what we now refer to as “religion” from roughly the time that writing first developed. Scriptures such as the *Daodejing* and the Bible are some of the most famous pieces of writing in the world, and epics such as the *Mahabharata* and the *Odyssey* are shot through with religious themes. Today scholars of religion write academic books and articles about religion. Outside of the academy, popular authors produce bestselling books on religious themes, including memoirs about how they left the religions of their youths or found new forms of spirituality (or both). Meanwhile, pundits write op-eds about religion and politics and journalists produce long-form magazine articles about religious communities. Writing about religion can be serious or funny. It can focus on belief or belonging (or both)—on food, family, art, sports, literature, hypocrisy, faith, power, class, race, and sexuality. In this course, we will read writing about religion in many non-fiction genres, and then experiment with writing in those genres ourselves

### Prerequisites

WR100 (or its equivalent)

### Hub Learning Outcomes

1. Philosophical, Aesthetic, and Historical Interpretation: Aesthetic Exploration
2. Diversity, Civic Engagement, and Global Citizenship: Global Citizenship and Intercultural Literacy
3. Writing-intensive Course

As students in this course, you will explore, with a combination of empathy and critical engagement, notable non-fiction works in a variety of genres, including Instagram essays, academic articles, memoir, and long-form narrative non-fiction. You will engage in the ancient practice of reading texts closely (and slowly) and in the more recent practice of “workshopping” your writing and that of your classmates.

As a religious studies course, “Writing Religion” will acquaint you with modern and contemporary authors who identify as Christians and Muslims, Buddhists and nonbelievers. But we will also attend with care to diversities of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. How do these categories matter to writers? Readers? And how do they interact with the category of “religion”?

This course is also writing-intensive. That means that you will be writing regularly, both in class and outside of it, and that your writing will be followed by critical evaluation and then rewriting. Along the way, I expect that you will become not only better readers but also better writers, able to use the craft of writing to hone your own points of view and to express them to others.

### Prerequisites:

WR100 (or its equivalent)

## **Instructional Format, Course Pedagogy, and Approach to Learning**

This is a seminar that will be run first and foremost as a discussion. I will not be lecturing and your primary task is not to take notes but to participate by listening carefully to and conversing with one another.

### **Requirements**

- Class participation (including ungraded writing assignments): 20%. In any conversation, active participation is crucial. In order to participate effectively in this course, you obviously need to show up. But in order to participate effectively, you need to do the reading *and* to reflect on it before class. Short writing assignments (including in-class writing) also count for this class participation grade. So does the feedback you offer to the work of other students in our workshops. At the beginning of each of our meetings you will also be asked to hand in a small piece of paper with a single observation or question about the reading assigned for that class.
- Personal essay: 4-6 pages or 1000-1500 words, **due March 5** at the start of class. 20% of final grade.
- Researched essay: 8-10 pages or 2000-2500 words, **due May 2** at the start of class. 40% of final grade. This grade also includes a one-page prospectus for this researched essay, **due March 19** at the start of class.
- Op-ed: 500-700 words, **due Apr 16** at the start of class. 10% of final grade.
- Instagram essays (3) or Object essay (500-1000 words), **due April 25** at the beginning of class. 10% of final grade.

### **Workshops**

Workshops are collaborative. They provide an opportunity for you to benefit from the comments and constructive criticisms of your writing by your classmates. Please post your writing for workshops on our Blackboard site by the due date. Read and reflect on all the writing for the workshop and post a brief response (one paragraph is fine) to each before class. In these responses you should be critical yet empathetic. Above all, you should be helpful. Be sure to:

- (a) Praise something in the draft. Be specific. Cite a sentence, argument, or observation.
- (b) Criticize something in the draft. Again, be specific. Also be sure to suggest a way that the problem you cite can be fixed or improved.

### ***(Needs Conduct Code)***

### **Required Reading**

Jeff Sharlet, ed., *Radiant Truths: Essential Dispatches, Reports, Confessions, and Other Essays on American Belief*

Ann Lamott, *Bird by Bird*

Dennis Covington, *Salvation on Sand Mountain*

Julie Byrne, *O God of Players*

Lauren Winner, *Girl Without God*

Various essays online and on Blackboard

## **INTRODUCTIONS**

Jan 22: Introduction(s): What is Religion and How Should We Write About It?

Reading: Peter Manseau, "Four Noble Truths of Religion Writing."

Jan 24: Introduction(s): In-Class Writing Assignment

Assignment: Interview a classmate and write a short profile of them (250 ungraded words)

Jan 29: Sacred Texts: What Makes a Text Sacred?

Reading: “About” and “Our Methodology” (under “About” on <http://www.harrypottersacredtext.com/>)

Listening: To “The Boy Who Lived” (Episode 1 of the Harry Potter & the Sacred Text podcast)

Jan 31: Your Sacred Texts: What About You Makes This Text Sacred?

Assignment: Select a text that is sacred to you, re-read it closely, and bring a portion of it to class (hard copy) for discussion.

Possible guest: Guest: Vanessa Zoltan, Harvard Humanist Chaplain and co-founder of Harry Potter & the Sacred Text

Feb 7: Great Stories, Well Told: What Makes A Story Work?

Reading: “Street Haunting” by Virginia Woolf

In-class short film: “Plastic Bag” by Werner Herzog

In-class YouTube: Kurt Vonnegut on structure

## PERSONAL ESSAYS

Feb 9: Wandering and Writing

Reading: Anne Lamott, “Looking Around” and “Index Cards,” in *Bird by Bird* (97-102, 133-44).

Assignment: Take your notebook, take a wander, and write about it. Turn off your computer, leave your smart phone behind, and head outside without plan or destination. Wander around. Slow down. Pay attention. You might settle for a while somewhere. You might not. Either way, write 250-500 (not-to-be-graded) words about what you experienced and link it to broader projects in your life (as a student, as a writer, as a queer cowboy, as a believer or a nonbeliever).

Feb 12: What is a Personal Essay and How Do You Write One?

Reading: Anne Lamott, “Introduction” and “The Moral Point of View,” *Bird by Bird*, xi-xxxii, 103-109; Anne Lamott, “Shitty First Drafts” and “Perfectionism,” *Bird by Bird*, 21-32. Jeff Sharlett, “This Mutant Genre,” in *Radiant Truths*, 1-15.

Feb 14: Personal Essays on Religion and Other Magical Things

Reading: Annie Dillard, “The Death of a Moth” and “How I Wrote the Moth Essay—and Why”; James Baldwin, “Down at the Cross,” in Sharlett, 171-184; Kathryn Schultz, “When Things Go Missing.”

Feb 19 \*\* NO CLASS \*\* (Monday schedule on this day because of Presidents’ Day holiday)

Feb 21: Personal Essays on Irreligion and Other Magical Things

Marie Myung-Ok Lee, “Losing My Religion,” *Tricycle*, <https://tricycle.org/magazine/losing-my-religion/>; Meera Subramanian, “The Age of Loneliness,” *Guernica*,



<https://www.guernicamag.com/the-age-of-loneliness/>; Quince Mountain, "Cowboy for Christ," <http://killingthebuddha.com/mag/confession/cowboy-for-christ/>.

Feb 26: Workshop on Personal Essays (#1)

Assignment: Submit on Blackboard a draft of your personal essay 24 hours before class; read, reflect, and respond, also on Blackboard, to the drafts of your classmates.

Read: Anne Lamott, "Someone to Read Your Drafts," *Bird by Bird*, 162-72.

Feb 28: Workshop on Personal Essays (#2)

Assignment: Read and comment on all your classmates' essays slated for today

Reading: Anne Lamott, "How Do You Know When You're Done?" *Bird by Bird*, 93-94.

Mar 5: In-class writing assignment (t.b.a.)

Assignment: **Submit personal essay** on Blackboard by the start of class.

Mar 7: Spiritual Memoir with Guest

Reading: Lauren Winner, *Girl Meets God*

\*\* SPRING BREAK (Mar 9-17) \*\*

#### RESEARCHED ESSAYS

Mar 19: Long-form Investigative Journalism on Religion

Reading: Anne Lamott, "Calling Around," *Bird by Bird*, 145-50; John Jeremiah Sullivan, "Upon This Rock," in *Radiant Truths*, 351-83; Jeff Sharlet, "Donald Trump, American Preacher," *New York Times Magazine* (April 12, 2016), <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/17/magazine/donald-trump-american-preacher.html>.

Mar 21: Long-Form Investigative Journalism on Religion: Guest

Guest: Visiting long-form journalist t.b.a. (possibilities include Jeff Sharlet [Dartmouth], Peter Manseau [Smithsonian], Michelle Boorstein [Washington Post], Meera Subramanian [freelance]).

Reading: by the guest, t.b.a

Mar 26: Writing Academic Articles on Religion

Reading: Fay Halpern et al., *A Guide to Writing in Religious Studies*, [http://hwpi.harvard.edu/files/hwp/files/religious\\_studies.pdf](http://hwpi.harvard.edu/files/hwp/files/religious_studies.pdf).

Assignment: Read an academic article (ideally in a peer-reviewed journal) that intrigues you, reflect on its strengths and weaknesses, and bring it (hard copy) to class.

Mar 28: Academic Articles on Religion: J.Z. Smith

Reading: J.Z. Smith, "Map Is Not Territory" (1978), <https://lettereapoline.files.wordpress.com/2014/03/smith-jz-earth-and-gods.pdf>.

Apr 2: Academic Articles on Religion: Guest

Reading: Anthony Petro, "Ray Navarro's Jesus Camp, AIDS Activist Video, and the "New Anti-Catholicism," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 85.4 (December 2017): 920-56.

Apr 4: Academic Books on Religion: Guest

Reading: Julie Byrne, *O God of Players: The Story of the Immaculata Mighty Macs* (2003).

In-class: brainstorming about researched essays

Assignment: One-page prospectus for researched essay. Be sure to include: topic (what you will write about); method (how you will go about writing it); and argument or hypothesis.

Apr 9: Op-eds on Religion and Politics

Reading: Stephen Prothero, "Should Schools Scrap Religious Holidays," *USA Today*, December 20, 2010; Stephen Prothero, "Six Things I Don't Want to Hear After the Sandy Hook Massacre," <http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2012/12/18/my-take-six-things-i-dont-want-to-hear-after-the-sandy-hook-massacre/>; Michael Gerson, "The Trump Evangelicals Have Lost Their Gag Reflex," *Washington Post*, January 22, 2018, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-trump-evangelicals-have-lost-their-gag-reflex/2018/01/22/761d1174-ffa8-11e7-bb03-722769454f82\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.e1210704bf5a](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-trump-evangelicals-have-lost-their-gag-reflex/2018/01/22/761d1174-ffa8-11e7-bb03-722769454f82_story.html?utm_term=.e1210704bf5a); Michael Gerson, "It's Apocalypse Now on Guns," *Washington Post*, February 26, 2018, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/its-apocalypse-now-on-guns/2018/02/26/38b49ecc-1b20-11e8-9de1-147dd2df3829\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.16c3d0691895](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/its-apocalypse-now-on-guns/2018/02/26/38b49ecc-1b20-11e8-9de1-147dd2df3829_story.html?utm_term=.16c3d0691895)

Apr 11: Workshop

Assignment: Post on Blackboard a draft of your op-ed 24 hours before class (500-700 words); read, reflect, and respond in one paragraph (also on Blackboard) to the op-eds of your classmates.

Apr 16: Instagram Essays

Reading: Neal Shea Instagram feed, <https://www.instagram.com/neilshea13/?hl=en>.

Assignment: Completed op-ed due at the beginning of class (500-700 words—no more and no less).

Apr 18: Object Narratives

Reading: Kathryn Lofton and John Lardas Modern, "Invitation" to contributors to their "Collaborative Genealogy of Spirituality," <http://frequencies.ssrc.org/invitation/>. Plus these essays (out of roughly 800 responses): Julie Byrne, "Saint February," <http://frequencies.ssrc.org/2011/09/06/saint-february/>; David Kyuman Kim, "Iphone," <http://frequencies.ssrc.org/2011/10/11/iphone/>; S. Brent Plate, "Star Wars," <http://frequencies.ssrc.org/2012/01/09/star-wars/>; SherAli Tereen, "Park51"; Judith Weisenfeld, "Happy S. Love," <http://frequencies.ssrc.org/2011/10/26/happy-s-love/>.

Apr 23 Workshop

Assignment: Draft *either* 3 Instagram essays or a short object narrative (500-1200 words) and post this draft to our Blackboard site 24 hours before class. Read, reflect on, and respond to your classmates' work in one paragraph, also on Blackboard.

Apr 25 Iconic Texts in American Religion: What Makes them Iconic?

Reading: Martin Luther King Jr., "Letter from Birmingham Jail,"

[https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles\\_Gen/Letter\\_Birmingham.html](https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html)

Assignment: Submit final draft of *either* Instagram essays or short object narrative by the beginning of class

Apr 30 Book Reviews on Religion

Reading: Stephen Prothero, "Surveying Religions' Building Blocks," (on Karen Armstrong's *The Great Transformation*), *Boston Globe*, May 21, 2006,

[http://archive.boston.com/ae/books/articles/2006/05/21/surveying\\_religions\\_building\\_blocks/?page=full](http://archive.boston.com/ae/books/articles/2006/05/21/surveying_religions_building_blocks/?page=full); book reviews of your choice by Lori Miller and Dwight Garner (bring copies to class).

Extra Credit: Write a short book review (500-800 words) about any of the books we read in class.

May 2: Oral Presentations of Your Researched Essays

Assignment: Researched Essay due at the start of class

Assignment: Come to class prepared to deliver a short presentation (5 minutes) of your final paper and to participate in a short Q & A.