

# Interreligious Understanding

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## Focus

In many societies, particularly in communities in the United States and in Islamic countries, religion plays a major role in creating cohesion and social identity. Providing foundations for values, ethics, or the legal system, religion has a strong normative function in these societies. At the same time, however, religious issues and sensitivities cause conflicts and misunderstandings. It is significant that the same actions and strategies that are claimed to be part of a “war on terror” in the US are framed as a “war on Islam” in other parts of the world. All this makes it necessary to reflect on the *problems* and *possibilities* of interreligious understanding.

This class is divided into three parts: The first part concerns the question “What is religion?” Here, we will talk about (a) the role of religion in providing values, guidelines, and examples of human existence that are important to organize interactions in societies; (b) historical changes of the role of religion in different cultures; (c) a variety of scientific approaches in the study of religion; and (d) the challenge of being a religious person.

The second part goes into more detail regarding the challenges of a religious existence. We will use one of the oldest examples of what it means to be a religious person: the story of Abraham who was challenged by God to sacrifice his only son (Gen. 22). This story has been interpreted over thousands of years by the three, big monotheistic world religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—as providing a paradigm of religious existence. By contrasting Abraham as a role model of a “God-fearing” man with the concept of man as a free and rational being that is fundamental for the ethics of the Enlightenment (Immanuel Kant), we will see that conflicts and contradictions are something that are crucial not only between religions, but also within them. Søren Kierkegaard is the philosopher and theologian who stressed this most vividly in his *Fear and Trembling*, a book on Gen. 22.

The third part focuses on the problems and perspectives of interreligious understanding. The central thesis is that religions not only have a social function as stressed in the first part, but that the teachings and practices of religions are also essential parts of the narratives that shape who we are, how we talk, and what we think and do. Whether those narratives are religious or not, the general message is that we all grew up in very specific worlds of ideas, concepts, stories, images, practices, institutions, interpretations, and theories. All this can be represented in “narratives.” Those narratives are what we are using every day to make sense of what we perceive around us. There is no understanding that is not dependent on those narratives. They provide the cognitive frames that determine our ways of understanding something and—at the same time—they *limit* the possibilities of our understanding.

In parallel to these three parts, we will learn something about a variety of religions all over the world.

## New Ways of learning

This seminar focuses on the development of certain competencies: reconstructing and representing arguments; criticizing and improving arguments and positions; clarifying ideas; social learning through mutual criticism and support; reflecting on one’s own conditions and limitations of understanding; productive self-criticism; clear thinking. In order to train these skills, the basic activities in this seminar will be *reading*, *writing*, *discussing*, *re-writing*, and *presenting*. Each class meeting has three sections. In the first section, there will be a short summary (with discussion) of the previous class presented by a small

group of students (5 to 10 minutes). The second section will be reserved for discussions about the readings. To prepare these discussions, I will give you a few questions each week that allow us to focus on the readings' central points. Your job is to read the texts and to answer all these questions in about one page. The idea is that we are best prepared for our discussions when we have already grappled at home with the ideas we will focus on in class.

One interesting aspect of this will be to see how many different answers, interpretations, and arguments are possible. Our discussions will reveal these differences, and they will give you an opportunity to reflect critically on what you have done individually at home, and also an opportunity to improve your own thinking by learning from others. That is what is most important for learning. I am not interested in what you already know, but in how you improve your own thinking. To do this, your second task in each week will be to *revise* the answers you formulated for the preparation of the discussions. You will see that you are much better prepared for our discussions when you have already written something in advance. And I hope that our discussions will motivate you to improve these writings in a second round of reflections at home again.

In the third section of each class we will have group presentations about additional readings. Everybody has to sign up for one group presentation (and for one summary). The presentation should be about 20 minutes so that there is enough time for discussion.

## Readings

*Books to buy at the Engineers Bookstore:*

- Kierkegaard, S. (2006 <1843>). *Fear and Trembling* (A. Hannay, Trans.). New York: Penguin Books.
- Esposito, J. L., Fasching, D. J., & Lewis, T. (2006). *World religions today* (2nd ed.). New York: Oxford University Press.

*Download from our course page at <http://T-Square.gatech.edu>, folder "Resources":*

- Abu-Nimer, M. (2001). Conflict Resolution, Culture, and Religion: Toward a Training Model of Interreligious Peacebuilding *Journal of Peace Research*, 38(6), 685-704. (main reading. Prepared a week earlier by a presentation of Bennett, 1993)
- Atran, S. (2005). Interview with Abu Bakr Ba'asyir. Full interview in English and Bahasa Indonesia with the alleged leader of Jemaah Islamiyah, from Cipinang prison, Jakarta, August 13 and 15, 2005. [http://www.sitemaker.umich.edu/satran/files/atranba\\_asyirinterview020905.pdf](http://www.sitemaker.umich.edu/satran/files/atranba_asyirinterview020905.pdf).
- Augustine. (397-398 A.D.). *The Confessions, Book VIII*. Retrieved July 8, 2007, from <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/110108.htm>: §1, §§13-29.
- Bennett, M. J. (1993). Towards Ethnorelativism: A Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity. In M. Paige (Ed.), *Education for the Intercultural Experience* (2. ed., pp. 20-72). Yarmouth: Intercultural Press.
- Crossley, M. L. (2000). *Introducing narrative psychology. Self, trauma, and the construction of meaning*. Buckingham; Philadelphia: Open University Press, pp. 10-13; 45-64.
- Economist. (2006). Pushtunwali. Honour among them. Thieves, murderers, rapists; and how the Pushtuns' ancient tribal code is fighting for survival against radical Islam. *The Economist, Dec 19th*.

- Economist. (2007). Religion in China. When opium can be benign. China's Communist Party, re-considering Marx's words, is starting to wonder whether there might not be a use for religion after all. *The Economist*, Feb 1st, 25-27.
- Emmett, C. F. (1997). The status quo solution for Jerusalem. *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 26 (2), 16-28.
- Genesis 22. (M. Hoffmann, Trans.). Based on O. Eibfeld (Ed.), *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia. Liber Genesis*. Stuttgart 1983: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft.
- Ghoniem, M., & Saifullah, M. S. M. The Sacrifice Of Abraham: Isaac or Ishmael? *Islamic Awareness*, online: <http://www.islamic-awareness.org/Quran/Contrad/MusTrad/sacrifice.html>.
- Hadi, M. A. (2007a). Introduction. In *Documents on Jerusalem* (Vol. 1): <http://www.passia.org/publications/Documents-Jerusalem/Documents-on-Jerusalem.html#intro>. Jerusalem: PASSIA Publication (Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs).
- Hadi, M. A. (Ed.). (2007b). *Documents on Jerusalem*. Jerusalem: PASSIA Publication (Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs).
- Hasson, S. (1996). Local politics and split citizenship in Jerusalem. *International journal of urban and regional research*, 20 (1), 116-133.
- Kant, I. (1996 <1793>). Religion within the boundaries of mere reason (G. d. Giovanni, Trans.). In A. W. Wood & G. d. Giovanni (Eds.), *Immanuel Kant. Religion and Rational Theology* (pp. 39-215). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 57-60, 177.
- Kant, I. (1996 <1798>). The conflict of the faculties (M. J. Gregor & R. Anchor, Trans.). In A. W. Wood & G. d. Giovanni (Eds.), *Immanuel Kant. Religion and Rational Theology* (pp. 233-327). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 281-284.
- Kelman, H. C. (2006). National Identity and The Role of the "Other" in Existential Conflicts: *The Israeli-Palestinian Case. International Scientific Journal of Methods and Models of Complexity* 8(1) Retrieved Dec. 6, 2006, from <http://www.nosmo.nl/isj/kelman.pdf>
- Kletter, L. (1981). The sovereignty of Jerusalem in international law. *Columbia Journal of Transnational Law*, 20(2), 319-363.
- Lilla, M. (2007 August 19). The Politics of God. *The New York Times. Magazine*, 28-35, 50-55.
- Lombardi, C., & Brown, N. (2006). Do Constitutions Requiring Adherence to Shari'a Threaten Human Rights? How Egypt's Constitutional Court Reconciles Islamic Law with the Liberal Rule of Law. *American University International Law Review*, 21, 379-435.
- Marsella, A. J. (2005). Culture and conflict: Understanding, negotiating, and reconciling conflicting constructions of reality. *International Journal for Intercultural Relations*, 29, 651-673.
- McCormick, M. (2006). Immanuel Kant (1724-1804): Metaphysics. *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* Retrieved Aug 19, 2007, from <http://www.iep.utm.edu/k/kantmeta.htm>. Chap.8 Kant's Ethics.
- Nisbett, R. E., Peng, K., Choi, I., & Norenzayan, A. (2001). Culture and systems of thought: Holistic versus analytic cognition. *Psychological Review*, 108(2), 291-310.
- Osho. (2004). *Zen. Its history and teaching*. Lewes, UK: The Bridgewater Book Company Ltd, pp. 16-31.

- Partridge, C. (Ed.). (2005). *Introduction to world religions*. Minneapolis Fortress Press, pp. 14-33.
- pbs (2007). Dishing Democracy. Behind the scenes at Arab television channel MBC in Cairo. In *Wide Angle*, ed. USA: <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/wideangle/shows/cairo/index.html>.
- Quigley, J. (1996). Sovereignty in Jerusalem. *Catholic University Law Review*, 45 (3), 765-780.
- Qur'an. God's order to Abraham to sacrifice his son. In Qur'an Archive (verse 37:99 to verse 37:109): [http://www.isna.net/library/quran/quran\\_e/37.html](http://www.isna.net/library/quran/quran_e/37.html).
- von Dassow, E. (Ed.). (1994). *The Egyptian Book of the dead: the Book of going forth by day: being the Papyrus of Ani (royal scribe of the divine offerings), written and illustrated circa 1250 B.C.E., by scribes and artists unknown, including the balance of chapters of the books of the dead known as the theban recension, compiled from ancient texts, dating back to the roots of egyptian civilization*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books. Plate 31 with text of the Papyrus of Ani (circa 1250 B.C.), and chapter 64 of the Theban Recension (dating back to the roots of Egyptian civilization).
- Waldman, A. (2005, July 31). Seething Unease Shaped British Bombers' Newfound Zeal. *The New York Times*.

### Tools (available in “Resources” in T-Square):

- “Tools for Philosophy.” A document that lists encyclopaedias (books and online) that can help if you have problems with philosophical terminology.
- A link to Cmap (<http://cmap.ihmc.us/>), a software that can be used to structure the representation of texts and arguments. If it is difficult to identify the essential idea of a text, or the structure of an argumentation, it makes sense to organize what you read on a map. Place central quotes in text boxes on your map, focus especially on the relations between those, and play with various structures. Links to examples of a more sophisticated method that elaborates on these ideas (called Logical Argument Mapping) can be found at the end of [http://www.prism.gatech.edu/~mh327/argument-mapping\\_111.ppt](http://www.prism.gatech.edu/~mh327/argument-mapping_111.ppt).

### Schedule

<i>Week</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Theme</i>	<i>Texts</i>
1	Aug 23	Introduction	
		Workgroups	Von Dassow: <i>Book of the Dead</i>
		pbs-documentary “Dishing Democracy”	pbs (2007)
<b>What is religion? Its normative and social function</b>			
2	Aug 30	World religions in times of globalization	Esposito et al.: Introduction
		<i>Presentation: Different approaches to religion</i>	<i>Partridge (2005)</i>
3	Sept 6	The role of religion to create social cohesion and to shape identities	Economist (2006) and (2007); Waldman (2005); Lilla (2007)
		<i>Presentation: Shari'a law in Egypt</i>	<i>Lombardi &amp; Brown (2006)</i>

<i>Week</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Theme</i>	<i>Texts</i>
4	Sept 13	Turning to the essence: An example from Zen-Buddhism and Christianity	Augustine; Osho (2004)
		<i>Presentation: Judaism</i>	<i>Esposito et al.: chap. 3</i>
<b>Conflicts and contradictions as part of religious existence</b>			
5	Sept 20	The binding of Isaac, or Abraham's sacrifice	Genesis 22; Qu'ran; Ghoniem & Saifullah
		<i>Presentation: Christianity</i>	<i>Esposito et al.: chap. 4</i>
6	Sept 27	The conflict between rationality- and freedom-based ethics and Gen.22	McCormick (2006); Kant 1793 & 1798; Kierkegaard 3-7
		<i>Presentation: Islam</i>	<i>Esposito et al.: chap. 5</i>
7	Oct 4	Working out the conflict	Kierkegaard 8-61
		<i>Presentation: Hinduism</i>	<i>Esposito et al.: chap. 6</i>
8	Oct 11	Understanding Abraham	Kierkegaard 62-99; 137-148
		<i>Presentation: Buddhism</i>	<i>Esposito et al.: chap. 7</i>
<b>Problems and perspectives of interreligious understanding</b>			
9	Oct 18	Changing identities to resolve conflicts	Kelman (2006)
		<i>Presentation: A terrorist's narrative</i>	<i>Atran (2005) Interview</i>
	Oct 25	<b>no class!</b>	
10	Nov 1	Narratives that shape your self	Crossley (2000)
		<i>Presentation: Varieties of thinking styles</i>	<i>Nisbett et al. (2001)</i>
11	Nov 8	Sovereignty of Jerusalem	Hasson (1996); Hadi (2007a)
		<i>Presentation: Jerusalem—History, religion, and international law</i>	<i>Emmett (1997) and [Quigley (1996) or Kletter (1981)]</i>
12	Nov 15	Small groups simulating negotiations between Israeli and Palestinians on how the sovereignty of Jerusalem should be regulated, and especially how the political and religious administration of the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif could be managed	Prepare your group work with your own selection of documents from Hadi (2007b, in the library) or other material
	Nov 22	<b>Thanksgiving holiday</b>	
13	Nov 29	A discussion with the author	Marsella (2005)
		<i>Presentation: A developmental model of intercultural sensitivity</i>	<i>Bennett (1993)</i>
14	Dec 6	Bennett's model applied to interreligious training	Abu-Nimer (2001)
		<i>Final discussion</i>	

## Grading

The basis for your grade is your *continuous* reading, writing, and participating in one our class discussions, and the participation in one group that presents a summary, and another one that presents one of the texts listed above. You have to work hard to get the grades you wish to have, but this work is equally distributed over the whole semester. There will neither be an extra essay, nor a final exam.

### *Attendance*

Since you will learn mainly by our class discussions, **attendance** is mandatory. There will be 14 class meetings over the whole semester. Independently of the other points you can get in the other areas, you will get an “**F**” if you attend less than 8 meetings, and nothing better than a “**C**” if less than 10. Please sign the attendance list that will be available during the first 5 to 10 minutes of each class.

### *Participation*

8% of your final grade will depend on the amount and quality of your **contributions** to our class discussions over the whole semester. Your contributions are essential for this seminar-style class.

Maximum for your contributions to class discussions: **8 points**.

### *Homework, first version*

32% can simply be reached by sending your written answers to the questions about the readings in 8 weeks out of 13 **before class starts**. (If you submit answers for more weeks, I will count only the 8 best weeks). I will not evaluate the quality of these first version answers. The only thing that counts is whether you send them or not (4 points for each). Most of the readings (i.e. everything besides the book) can be downloaded from **T-Square**, GT’s new collaborative learning environment that replaces Web-CT. Go to <http://T-Square.gatech.edu>, and log in using your gt-account and password. The readings are accessible through the link “Resources” in the left panel. Your homework tasks are available through the link “Assignments Auto-submission.” “Auto-submission” means that your assignments—on which you may work over a longer time—will automatically be submitted at the deadline for this assignment. However, this works only for what you *saved manually* before submitting. You should save your work every 10 minutes when working directly in the T-Square text field. If you don’t work on your assignments for a while, you may lose everything when your connection times out. It may be better to do your homework with a local text-editor on your computer and copy and paste then. Anyway, you will find all the questions in “Assignments Auto-submission,” and you have to submit your answers through the text field that you will find at the same location. Only T-Square submissions are accepted. I expect *at least* half a page reasonable text for all questions together.

Maximum for first version homework: **32 points**.

### *Homework, second version*

Although the first version will not be assessed, what I will evaluate is the quality of your revision, that is the *progress* between first and second version. I expect these revisions by the following Monday. There is a special “Assignments Auto-submission” section for each second version in T-Square. On these revisions depend another 40% of your final grade. The main idea is that you do not compete with

others for good grades, you compete with yourself. What counts is what you have learnt in our class discussions.

Evaluation criteria: 0 points if your second version is the same as the first one; 1 point if there are only marginal changes in your second version, or if you do not answer the questions. One further point, up to a maximum sum of 5 points, is possible for each of the following cases: (1.) there are improvements, but no substantial ones; (2.) there are substantial improvements (for example: a new argument, clarification of terminology, a new structure of your answer, better examples); (3.) you reflect explicitly on the reading, and (4.) on the main point(s) of our class discussion. A 5-points submission must not only be good, but excellent with regard to clarity and adequacy for the topic. Please note that an improvement is not necessarily longer than the original version, rather the opposite. Clarifying the structure of your argument and focusing on the essential points is mostly better than making things more complex.

Although the deadline for second versions will be set on the next Monday, 11p.m., I will accept second versions within three weeks (exception: general deadline at the end of semester, Dec.13). If you do not send a first version before class on Thursday, what you send later will be treated as a first version (4 points). Thus, it becomes clear that working continuously is more important than anything else. However, it is possible to submit improvements of these later versions by relating the task to new themes of the ongoing class discussion (only after consultation).

The main point is that I really expect that you revise your first version answers based on what you have learnt in our discussions. Even if your first answers are nearly perfect, there are always new perspectives that can enrich your prior point of view, and it is always possible to structure and formulate an argument in a better way. Learning means the development of your own thinking. There are no absolute standards what you should “know” at the end of this semester. More important is the process of learning and the improvement of your thinking.

Maximum for second version homework: **40 points**.

### *Presentations*

Further 14% are based on your group presentation on the topic, and reading, that is listed in the syllabus. You have to sign up for one presentation in T-Square via “Section Info.” In order to distinguish these groups from the summary groups, they are listed in T-Square as “Discussions.”

Evaluation criteria: The presentation should be interesting and challenging for the audience; clearly structured with regard to theses, arguments, and problems; all group members must be involved; the audience should be motivated to discuss the issues presented. There is a certain danger that people in class get overwhelmed by too many details. Therefore, you should focus on only one essential message, one central idea (or a clearly defined set of ideas). Use the material of the reading only so far as it supports your point. It is important to repeat this point time and again, and to relate all the details of your talk clearly to your overall message. To identify the central point of your presentation, ask yourself: What is the function of the reading for this seminar? The presentation should be about 20 minutes.

Maximum for the presentation: **14 points**.

### *Summary*

6% are based on a presentation of a short summary of the last class meeting (in groups; 5-10 minutes). The task is to summarize some central points of both the previous class discussion on the reading *and* of what has been presented by a group. Talk especially about questions you might have with regard to both so that we can clarify problems that are still open in a short discussion at the beginning of each class.

You have to sign up for one summary in T-Square via “Section Info.” The summary groups are listed here as “Labs” to distinguish them from the presentations mentioned above.

Maximum for the summary: **6 points**.

*Check your points regularly to see whether the system works*

During the whole semester, you can see all your points in the “Gradebook” of “T-Square.” But give me a few days to put them into the system.

*Grading system*

At the end, all your points will be transformed into letter grades according to the following list:

A	90-100
B	80-89
C	70-79
D	60-69
F	0-59

### **Academic Honor Code**

Based on GT’s Honor Advisory Council recommendation I would like to clarify the following points: You are allowed (and encouraged) to work together with other students on homework, as long as you write up and turn in your own solutions. Submitting any work other than your own is a violation of the Academic Honor Code. Quoting other authors, of course, is common scientific practice. However, you have to make absolutely clear what are your own formulations, and what those of others. You can quote the texts of our seminar in short form (e.g. “Esposito, p. 52”). Other sources have to be listed under “References.” Plagiarism will be dealt with according to the GT Academic Honor Code. Note that plagiarizing is defined by Webster’s as “to steal and pass off (the ideas or words of another) as one’s own : use (another’s production) without crediting the source.”

For any questions involving these or any other Academic Honor Code issues, please consult me or [www.honor.gatech.edu](http://www.honor.gatech.edu).

### **Contact**

Feel free to contact me if there are any problems you would like to discuss. My **office hours** are Tuesday 12:00-1:00 p.m. or by appointment. The office is located in the basement of the DM Smith Building, room 004. My **phone number** is 404-385-6083. The easiest way to contact me is by **e-mail**: [m.hoffmann@gatech.edu](mailto:m.hoffmann@gatech.edu).