George Mason University
GGS 590: Geography of Religions and Belief Systems
Fall Semester 2022 (August 22 – December 14)

Class meeting: R 1:30 PM – 4:10 PM	**Instructor**: Nathan Burtch
Class location: Horizon Hall 2010	**Email:** nburtch@gmu.edu
Sect/Credits: 002 / 3 credit hours	**Office hours:** T 10 – 11:00 AM via Zoom
Instructor office: EXPL 2413	W 10 – 11:00 AM in person

General Information

Classmate contact information:

Name	Email	Phone

Catalog description: Analyzes topics of immediate interest. *(This is a new special topics course covering the geography of religion and belief systems.)*

Course overview: As with other aspects of human culture, religion and belief manifests spatially in place. This intersection of geography and religion shapes our cultural landscapes and impacts a location's sense of place. Likely, we all have be witness to these spaces in the forms of houses of worship, but the spatial impact goes much further. Common themes of human or cultural geography are shared with religious beliefs; spatial diffusion of beliefs through proselytization, movement through pilgrimage, place-making through the creation of sacred spaces, and the claiming of place or territory in the name of beliefs. This course will cover spatial concepts of major religions around the world, with a focus on how to understand and give meaning to sacred spaces. As well, non-religious belief systems will be studied through this same spatial lens, as these beliefs likewise have a major impact on space, policy, conflict, and global change.

This course uses a seminar format for the majority of our meetings. While there will be some lecture, students should prepare each week via assigned readings and come prepared to ask questions, discuss, and allow our class to explore these concepts in an open manner. Respect for those in the class in discussions is an expectation.

Target audience: This course is co-listed at the 300/500 level; it is therefore intended for both undergraduate and graduate students interested in the spatialization of religious culture and belief. GGS 590 is a selected topics course that can be applied to the GECA MS and the ESGS PhD programs.

Applicable learning outcomes: Successful completion of this course will teach students:
1. Analyze characteristic features of religious and non-religious beliefs, both historical and contemporary.
2. Analyze the geography of major religious traditions in terms of origins, diffusion, and modern extent.

3. Interpret, evaluate, and critique how religions and belief systems impact and shape the cultural landscape.
4. Evaluate and analyze characteristics of diverse cultures and processes of change.
5. Analyze the processes of creating sacred spaces and their roles in practices of belief.

Prerequisites: None.

Enrollment and repeat policy: GGS 590 is an omnibus 'selected topics' course that can be repeated up to 12 credits as long as the topic varies. This course with this topic may only be repeated under special circumstances. Students enrolling in this course again must submit all newly completed work.

Course Materials

Required texts: Stump, Roger W. 2008. The geography of religion: Faith, place, and space. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
ISBN 13: 978-0-7425-1080-7

Hitchock, Susan and Esposito, John. Geography of religion. Washington, DC: National Geographic.
ISBN 13: 9780792259107

The texts for the course are available from various outlets in various forms. It is available through the Mason bookstore or through your online provider of choice. There will be additional readings posted on Blackboard for you to complete.

GGS computer lab and virtual computing: The lab in EXPL 2102 is open 24 hours for you to use. Registration in a GGS class should automatically grant you access. Please contact ggsit@gmu.edu to report issues.

Mason provides access to Mason Labs virtual computing through your web browser. In order to access it, you will need to install both a Mason VPN (https://its.gmu.edu/service/virtual-private-network-vpn/) and the Citrix Workspace app (https://www.citrix.com/products/receiver.html). After logging into the VPN, you can then access https://mymasonapps.gmu.edu/ using your Mason directory ID. Once inside, you will be able to access Mason Labs and have a virtual connection to a Mason lab computer with some specialized software. You can connect to the Microsoft One Drive cloud storage that each Mason student has or connect to local storage drives.

Software, hardware, and data: It is recommended that students have the technological bandwidth to stream data; students should have regular, reliable access to a computer with an updated operating system and a stable broadband Internet connection (consistent 1.5 Mbps or higher download and upload speed; you can use https://www.speedtest.net/ to check the speed of your connection).

Online materials and email: This course will make extensive use of Blackboard at Mason. Course materials such as assignments will be available only in electronic version on Blackboard. Also, students will be expected to submit assignments online through Blackboard. **Only Word document (.docx or .doc) or Adobe PDF (.pdf) file formats will be accepted,** with some exceptions.

Grades will be posted on Blackboard as well. Make sure you are familiar and comfortable with the Blackboard interface.

Students are required to have a MasonLive/Email account, which will allow you access to Blackboard and lab computers. Please use this university email account when contacting the professor regarding this class; your professor will not respond to messages sent from a non-Mason email address. Students may also contact the professor through Microsoft Teams, although students should not expect instant responses from these direct chats; in other words, Teams is not a 24/7 direct support line for the class.

Grading

Landscape analysis paper (25%): Each student will choose a different religious or sacred space (religious or non-religious) that is either local to the Washington, DC region, or otherwise a place in which the student will be able to visit. The paper will consist of a cultural landscape analysis of the sacred space. This paper, along with a pictorial presentation, will be due mid semester.

Sacred space paper (25%): This paper focuses specifically on a 'larger' and more famous sacred space (that does not need a site visitation) of each student's choosing. The sacred space paper will be in the format of a research report and covers the history and analyzes geographically a sacred space. The paper, along with a presentation, will be due during the final exam period.

Religion and the environment paper (10%): A shorter paper than the papers above, this paper requires a student to choose a religion or denomination and research the groups perspectives on the environment. Religions can vary widely in how the natural world is to be treated. Students may use holy books or scripture along with interpretation and other research sources.

Discussion questions (12.5%): It is an expectation that students prepare for each class meeting and participate. To aid in this, each student is required to write three (3) discussion questions based off of the readings for the week. We will likely not have time to discuss every question, but these will be used for building our class discussions. Students will hand in the questions prior to class via Blackboard. Always check Blackboard for additional readings beyond those directly listed in the syllabus.

Participation (12.5%): Participation in a seminar-style class is paramount. Students are expected to attend class and actively and substantially participate in discussions and activities.

Mapping religion project (15%): The Association of Religion Data Archives (theARDA.com) has a wealth of data available for religions at various geographies. Students will use the county-level US church membership data to map a religion or denomination. Students will choose a religion or denomination and map how the number of adherents and congregations have changed over time. You are encouraged to use as many of the dated datasets as possible, contingent upon the chosen denomination appearing in the data for particular years. Along with the maps will be a graduate-level paper outlining the chosen faith and its history to present geographical situation in the United States.

Graduate grading scale:

Grade	Percent Required			Assignment	Total Grade %			
A+	96 to 100	B	83 to 85.9	Sacred space	25%	Dis quest.	12.5%
A	93 to 95.9	B-	80 to 82.9	Landscape	25%	Participation	12.5%
A-	90 to 92.9	C	70 to 79.9	Rel/envir paper	10%	Mapping	15%
B+	86 to 89.9	F	<70				

Graduate student expectations: In order to earn graduate credit, students enrolled in GGS 590 have additional expectations. Graduate students are expected to develop deeper knowledge of the topics presented in class and synthesize with higher-level products and writing. In other words, expectations for the work produced in GGS 590 are commensurate with expectations of a 500-level course. Details on differential grading of graduate students on the above graded items will be provided on Blackboard.

Note on attendance: Regular attendance is an expectation. Those that make a habit of missing class tend to do worse in this course than those that do attend. It is in your best interest to come to class and participate as attendance will lead to a better understanding of course concepts. Students are responsible for any announcement given by the instructor during class regardless of their personal attendance.

Students that must miss classes because of religious observances or participation in University activities should provide documentation to the professor within the first two weeks of the course. Reasonable accommodations will be provided for work missed on those days. It is expected that if a student has one of these excused absences on a day in which an assignment is due that the student submits the assignment early.

Make-up and late assignment policies: Due dates are explicitly stated. All assessed/graded items in this course (listed above) will be accepted past the ascribed due date until **December 6th**. Late penalties are assigned in a two-tiered system. Items turned in **within seven (7) days will result in a 10% deduction** for the item. Items **later that seven (7) days will result in a 30% deduction** for the item. This penalty begins 1 minute after the due date. Technical excuses ("computer system error", "didn't submit correctly on Blackboard", etc.) will not be accepted as reasons for late work. You are expected to start the work early. **Never underestimate the time you will spend on the assignments.** If you cannot complete the assignment on time, it may be better to turn in partially completed work than nothing at all.

If you are ill or physically indisposed and cannot submit work on time, you must notify the instructor beforehand for you to have a chance to make up the work without late penalty. **Special dispensation is available for students with difficulties due to COVID-19 illness or quarantine**; please contact the instructor to make any special accommodations in this regard.

This policy may seem strict, but it is in your best interest to turn in everything on time to avoid falling irrecoverably behind. Please contact the instructor if you are struggling and you will receive aid as best as the instructor can provide.

Administrative

Academic integrity: *The following statement is adapted from the Stearns Center for Teaching and Learning.* No grade is important enough to justify academic misconduct. The integrity of the University community is affected by the individual choices made by each of us. Mason has an Honor Code, which you can read fully at the Office for Academic Integrity (https://oai.gmu.edu/mason-honor-code/). The Honor Code Pledge reads as follows:

> To promote a stronger sense of mutual responsibility, respect, trust, and fairness among all members of the George Mason University Community and with the desire for greater academic and personal achievement, we, the student members of the university community, have set for this Honor Code: Student Members of the George Mason University community pledge not to cheat, plagiarize, steal, or lie in matters related to academic work.

The Mason Honor Code defines cheating, plagiarism, stealing, and lying. It is expected that you understand these definitions. If you have any doubts about what constitutes cheating, plagiarism, stealing, or lying in the academic context, please see your professor. **Acts of academic dishonesty in this course may be penalized with failure of either the work in question or the entire course.**

While collaboration and group learning is encouraged in this course, each student **absolutely must** turn in their own work, from their own computer, and any discussion must be theirs alone, and not attributable to another person or group, *except where noted* (for example, quoting authors as a small portion of your scholarly work). This also applies to online sources; you cannot copy the words of anyone else for any graded part of this course. It is not enough to exchange a few synonyms within a sentence! You must write, summarize, and analyze with your own words and ideas.

Course materials and student privacy: All course materials posted to Blackboard or other course sites are private; by federal law, any materials that identify specific students (via their name, voice, or image) **must not be shared** with anyone not enrolled in this class. Video recordings of class meetings that include audio or visual information from other students are private and must not be shared. Live video conference meetings (e.g. Collaborate or Zoom) that include audio or visual information from other students must be viewed privately and not shared with others in your household. Some or all of our synchronous meetings in this class may be recorded to provide necessary information for students in this class. Recordings will be stored on Blackboard and will only be accessible to students taking this course during this semester. **Sharing of instructor-created materials** (lectures, notes, videos, assignments, exams, etc.) to others not currently enrolled in this specific section of this class, **including to public or private online "study" sites, is considered a violation of Mason's Honor Code.**

Disability statement: This course complies with Mason policies for students with disabilities. Students with disabilities are encouraged to register with Disability Services (DS). DS can be contacted by phone at (703) 993-2474, or in person at SUB I Suite 2500, or online by the link at the end of this section. Students who suspect that they have a disability, temporary or permanent, but do not have documentation are encouraged to contact DS for advice on how to obtain appropriate evaluation. A memo from DS authorizing your accommodation is needed before any accommodation can be made. The memo should be furnished to the professor preferably within the

first two weeks of class or as soon as an accommodation is made. Please visit https://ds.gmu.edu/ for more information.

Diversity, non-discrimination, and anti-racism: Mason President Gregory Washington has created the President's Task Force on Anti-Racism and Inclusive Excellence. Through a broad focus, the task force will help Mason become "a local, regional, and national beacon for the advancement of anti-racism, reconciliation, and healing." For President Washington's full statement, visit https://www2.gmu.edu/news/587381. Members of this classroom community must uphold Mason's core values of diversity and inclusion, and help maintain a learning environment of respect across identity, status, origin, and ability. Being inclusive and anti-racist is an active, conscious practice involving self-reflection.

Mason's non-discrimination policy can be read at https://universitypolicy.gmu.edu/policies/non-discrimination-policy/. Please utilize the office of Compliance, Diversity, and Ethics (https://diversity.gmu.edu/) for training, resources, and to submit grievances. The following is a short portion of the Mason Diversity Statement; visit https://stearnscenter.gmu.edu/knowledge-center/general-teaching-resources/mason-diversity-statement/ to read the full statement:

> George Mason University promotes a living and learning environment for outstanding growth and productivity among its students, faculty and staff. Through its curriculum, programs, policies, procedures, services and resources, Mason strives to maintain a quality environment for work, study and personal growth.
> An emphasis upon diversity and inclusion throughout the campus community is essential to achieve these goals. Diversity is broadly defined to include such characteristics as, but not limited to, race, ethnicity, gender, religion, age, disability, and sexual orientation. Diversity also entails different viewpoints, philosophies, and perspectives. Attention to these aspects of diversity will help promote a culture of inclusion and belonging, and an environment where diverse opinions, backgrounds and practices have the opportunity to be voiced, heard and respected.

Gender identity, pronoun use, and proper address: Students are welcome to share their chosen name and gender pronouns with the instructor and discuss how the instructor can best address you in class and via email. As well, students should be aware that they can use Mason-provided tools to update their chosen name and pronouns; these changes will appear in Blackboard class sites among other places. See https://registrar.gmu.edu/updating-chosen-name-pronouns/ for more information. Your instructor uses *he/him/his* pronouns. When addressing your instructor in writing or verbally, please use "Dr. Burtch" or "Prof. Burtch." The surname 'Burtch' is pronounced the same as 'birch.'

Instructor availability: Please do not hesitate to contact your instructor if you have questions about course topics or assignments. Your instructor will do his best to answer all weekday emails within 24 hours, and weekend emails within 48 hours. Should you not receive a response within that time frame, you may send a gentle reminder via email. Do try to avoid last-minute emails, as your instructor may not have email accessible immediately before deadlines. It is generally a good practice to avoid sending an email at the first sign of trouble with an assignment; often you will find the proper solution by giving yourself an hour or two to problem solve! Please make use of the office hours listed at the top of this document. Generally, issues can be clarified quickly in person or in a live online chat.

Safe return to campus: The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted our lives. Administration at Mason has developed protocols outlined in the university Safe Return to Campus website (https://www2.gmu.edu/safe-return-campus). Please familiarize yourself with Safe Return to Campus protocols. This course will follow official Mason administration guidance on public health as those policies shift.

Sexual harassment, sexual misconduct, and interpersonal violence: *The following statement is adapted from the Stearns Center for Teaching and Learning.* As a faculty member and designated "Responsible Employee," I am required to report all disclosures of sexual assault, interpersonal violence, stalking, sexual exploitation, and retaliation to Mason's Title IX Coordinator per university policy 1412. If you wish to speak with someone confidentially, please contact one of Mason's confidential resources, such as the Student Support and Advocacy Center at 703-380-1434, Counseling and Psychological Services at 703-993-2380, Student Health Services, or Mason's Title IX Coordinator at 703-993-8730 or via email at titleix@gmu.edu).

University-wide closures and class cancellations/delays: There may be times during the semester in which George Mason University announces university-wide closures or delays. Should inclement weather or another emergency force Mason to close, causing our class to cancel meeting times, we will not meet. Check the Mason website and our own Blackboard site for updates. Other cancellations or delays to class will be announced via Blackboard by your professor. In the event that this course has missed meeting times, the course schedule, assignment deadlines, and other course alterations will be decided upon and announced via Blackboard and email by the professor. You are expected to stay abreast of any changes.

Use of electronic devices: Your professor encourages the use of devices that both aid your learning ability and do not distract from the learning of others. Except for mobile phones and audio/video recorders, you are free to use any electronic device that fulfills both of those conditions. All electronic devices should be muted or silenced. Please be respectful of the class and avoid use of social media during class which can distract both you and your classmates. You are expected to adhere to Mason's student code of conduct; disruptive behavior will result in classroom removal. Audio/video recording requires the consent of the professor.

GGS 590 course schedule

Dates	Lecture Topics	Coursework Due
Unit 1: Geography of religions and belief systems		
Week 1 Aug 25	Intro: Geography of religion and belief systems	**Read** *Stump Ch. 1 & 2*
Week 2 Sep 1	Religion and territory	**Read** *H&E Ch. 1; Stump Ch. 4*
Week 3 Sep 8	Sacred spaces	**Read** *Stump Ch. 5*
Unit 2: Major religious faiths and spatiality		
Week 4 Sep 15	Hinduism	**Read** *H&E Ch. 2; Stump Ch. 3 (pp 109-121)*
Week 5 Sep 22	Buddhism	**Read** *H&E Ch. 3; Stump Ch. 3 (pp 133-159)*
Week 6 Sep 29	Judaism	**Read** *H&E Ch. 4; Stump Ch. 3 (pp 121-133)*
Week 7 Oct 6	Christianity	**Read** *H&E Ch. 5; Stump Ch. 3 (pp 159-188)*
Week 8 Oct 13	Islam	**Read** *H&E Ch. 6; Stump Ch. 3 (pp 188-218)*
Unit 3: American sacred sites and religion		
Week 9 Oct 20	Cultural landscape of a sacred space presentations	**Landscape paper**
Week 10 Oct 27	Religion in America	**Read** TBA **Map a religion (Map only)**
Week 11 Nov 3	American civil religion	**Read** TBA
Unit 4: Non-religious belief systems and conspiracies		
Week 12 Nov 10	Non-religious belief systems	**Read** TBA **Environment paper**
Week 13 Nov 17	Conspiracy beliefs	**Read** TBA
Week 14 Nov 24	*Thanksgiving Break – No class*	
Week 15 Dec 1	QAnon and the conspiracy singularity	**Read** TBA **Full map project**
Week 16 Dec 8	Sacred space analysis presentations *Thursday, Dec 8, 1:30 – 4:15 PM*	**Sacred space paper**

Note: The GGS 590 course schedule is tentative and is subject to revision by the instructor