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LITR 171 “Imagining the Holy Land”

Course Description:

While Americans have long been aware of the combustible politics of the Middle East, both contributing to the instability by providing resources—including weaponry—to participants, and, yet, also engaging, at the very highest political levels, in attempts to bring about resolution to some of the hostilities, we have been largely insulated—aside from the price of petroleum—from the impact of conflicts. On September 11, 2001, with the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, with the loss of nearly 3000 American lives, the United States was directly drawn into the turmoil. While most Americans have taken positions on U.S. involvement in the Middle East, few have had opportunity to consider the discourses that have supported the history of violence, few have addressed the significance, for instance, of President George W. Bush referring to our military effort as a “crusade” or of Osama bin Laden’s insistence on addressing his antagonists as “Jews and Crusaders.” Taking a particularly close look at literatures supporting various claims to “the Holy Land,” particularly the city of Jerusalem, this course will ask students to consider why, for almost a century, the three “peoples of the book,” Jews, Christians, and Muslims, have engaged in conflict. The course will ask students to think about how religious, racial, and political identities are fashioned, how these identities are represented in texts, and how these identities become, often enough, inextricably associated with territory.

All these issues stir debate. Virtually all of them are the subject of intense discussion (and often angry controversy) among the scholars who have studied them. This course will be no exception. You will undoubtedly hear points of view being presented that will conflict with your own, or that will simply be disturbing. You are encouraged, first of all, to consider the material being presented, and second, to formulate your own response to it. I hope this course will be a forum for a great deal of discussion, and I hope that each of you will contribute to a frank, open atmosphere.

Rationale for inclusion in the Global Awareness category of the General Education curriculum:

Most Americans receive their information about the Middle East from the U.S. press. They rarely have an opportunity to think about how the Middle East conflict has been and continues to be viewed by the rest of the world. They rarely, for instance, engage with the writings of Israelis or Palestinians. “Imagining the Holy Land” will ask students to look beyond their local sources for information and take a much wider perspective on Middle East violence. Specifically it will ask students to think about how the discourses by which

Christians, Jews, and Muslims have constituted their identities in relation to Israel/Palestine have proven, over the centuries, divisive.

Written Texts:

Karen Armstrong, *Jerusalem: One City, Three Faiths* (Ballantine, 1997)
The Song of Roland, Trans. W. S. Merwin (Modern Library Classics, 2001)
Modern Hebrew Literature, ed. Robert Alter (Berhman House, 1975)
The Anthology of Modern Palestinian Literature, ed. Salma Jayyusi (Columbia University Press, 1994)
Joe Sacco and Edward Said, *Palestine* (Fantagraphics Books, 2002)
Mark Twain, *The Innocents Abroad* (Signet Classics, 2007)
The Balfour Declaration of 1917
U.N. Security Council Resolution 242
Israel's Declaration of Independence
Palestinian National Charter
The Hamas Charter, 1988

Films:

Terry Jones' The Crusades
El Naser Salah el Dine, dir. Youssef Chahine
Kingdom of Heaven, dir. Ridley Scott
West Bank Story, dir. Ari Sandel

Course Calendar:

Weeks 1-2 FAITH AND JERUSALEM
Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all recognize, to a greater or lesser degree, Israel/Palestine as significant to religious identity. In this portion of the class we will discuss how the three “religions of the book” have represented the Holy Land, how they imagine their role in it, and their claims to it. We will consider various holy sites in the city of Jerusalem and discuss how structures serve to entwine religious identity with geography.

Readings:

Karen Armstrong, *Jerusalem: One City, Three Faiths*

Some Topics for Discussion:

What is the religious basis for the Jewish claim to the Holy Land?
What is the religious basis for the Christian claim to the Holy Land?
What is the religious basis for the Islamic claim to the Holy Land?
What are the religious sites that create and complicate competing claims to the Holy Land?
How does the “allegorical function” of the Holy Land function to create and complicate competing claims?

Weeks 3-5 THE CRUSADES

From the eleventh through the thirteenth centuries, European Christianity embarked on a number of military campaigns into the Islamic East. These campaigns were conducted largely for religious reasons—to conquer Jerusalem and to re-claim a number of Christian relics—but political and economic factors also played significantly into the equation. While the Crusades offered both Christians and Muslims—and, to a much lesser extent, Jews—a number of opportunities for mutual benefit, their destructiveness resonates even today. This portion of the course will consider what was at stake in the Crusades and what are the implications of how these medieval wars continue to be represented.

READINGS:

The Song of Roland

Films:

Terry Jones' The Crusades

El Naser Salah el Dine, dir. Youssef Chahine

Kingdom of Heaven, dir. Ridley Scott

Some Topics for Discussion:

What were the reasons for the Crusades?

In what ways do the Crusades serve to reconfigure the culture of the Christian West?

In what ways do the Crusades serve to reconfigure the culture of the Islamic East?

Why do the discourses of the Crusades continue to resonate in the twenty first century?

Weeks 6-7 IMPERIALIST FANTASY

This section of the course will consider the status of the Holy Land both under the control of the Ottoman Empire and immediately after its dissolution. In particular, students will consider the European/Euro-American fantasies of the Middle East—fantasies of Palestine, in particular—produced at the end of the nineteenth century as well as the rise of the modern Zionist imagination.

Readings:

Mark Twain, *The Innocents Abroad* (Signet Classics, 2007)

The Balfour Declaration of 1917

Some Topics for Discussion:

What is colonialism?

What does it mean to be “post-colonial”?

What is Orientalism?

What is “hybridity?”

How has modernity required re-imaginings of the Holy Land?

What is at stake in the founding of Israel as a Jewish State?

Weeks 8-15 **IMAGINING ISRAEL/IMAGINING PALESTINE/IMAGINING PEACE**

With the creation of the Jewish State of Israel in 1948, the world has entered into a continuous debate—and an apparently unceasing cycle of violence—concerning both access to and control of the Holy Land. Ancient feuds have escalated as Jews, Christians, and Muslims attempt to define themselves in reference to a small space (about the size of Rhode Island) in the Middle East. But even amidst the often horrific bloodshed, there have been attempts on all sides to re-imagine the Holy Land as a place of peace. In this final portion of the course, we will consider fantasies of the Holy Land that have served to divide us, and those that may some day bring us together.

Imagining Israel (Weeks 8-11)

Readings:

Selections from *Modern Hebrew Literature*, ed. Robert Alter (Berhman House, 1975)

Mendele Mocher Sforim, “Shem and Japheth on the Train”

S.Y. Agnon, “The Lady and the Peddler”

S. Yizhar, “The Prisoner”

Amos Oz, “Before His Time”

A. B. Yehoshua, “Facing the Forests”

U.N. Security Council Resolution 242

Israel’s Declaration of Independence

Imagining Palestine (Weeks 11-14)

Readings

Joe Sacco and Edward Said, *Palestine*

Selections from *The Anthology of Modern Palestinian Literature*, ed.

Salma Jayyusi (Columbia University Press, 1994)

Modern Palestinian Literature

Samira ‘Azzam, “Bread of Sacrifice”

Liyana Badr, “A Land of Rock and Thyme”

Tawfiq Fayyad, “The Idiot”

Emile Habiby, “The Odds and Ends Woman”

Mahmoud Sayf al-Din al-Irani, “Garbage”

Khalil al-Sawahiri, “The Spectators”

Subhi Ghosheh, from *Our Sun Will Never Set*

Palestinian National Charter

The Hamas Charter, 1988

Imagining Peace (Week 15)

Film:
West Bank Story, dir. Ari Sandel

Some Topics for Discussion:

How have Israeli authors expressed their support and discomfort with imagining themselves as members of a Jewish State?

What does the existence of a Jewish state mean to Christians?

How have Palestinians negotiated their responses to the establishment of a Jewish state?

How does a Jewish state stand in opposition to Islamic identity?

Is there any hope for peaceful co-existence in the Holy Land? How does literature speak to such hope?

How might a peace in the Holy Land be represented?

Assignments and Evaluation:

“Imagining the Holy Land” is a lecture/discussion class. Students will be required to attend lectures, read the books, see the films, and participate in classroom discussions. Learning will be tested by two examinations and two written essays (each approximately 3-5 pages in length). The examinations will cover readings, films, and materials discussed in class. Paper topics will be provided at least two weeks before due dates and will ask for an expansion on classroom discussion and for students to make arguments of their own about some of the material. Grades will be computed thusly:

Examinations	25% each
Essays	25% each