Religion in the Ancient Greek World

This course will introduce students to the history and culture of Ancient Greece through one of its most all-encompassing elements. Religion played a central role in everyday social, political, economic and artistic life, and despite the great diversity that marks most aspects of life between the various regions of the Ancient Greek world, there are enough common religious characteristics shared by all of these communities that it can be seen as a single system. As such, it can be fairly described as one of the principal characteristics of “Hellenicity”. A basic understanding of Greek Religion is therefore essential if any facet of the Ancient Greek world is to be fully comprehended.

The course will concentrate extensively on primary sources (particularly those related to material culture), but will also examine the theories and methodologies that modern scholars of religion have developed in order to attempt to understand this fascinating subject. It will cover the period from the end of the “Dark Age” to the rise of Christianity, and will thus enable due attention to be paid to the nature of the evolutions and continuities that have been seen to characterise Greek religion. It will focus mostly on mainland Greece, the Aegean islands and the western coast of Asia Minor, but Egypt, Italy, central Asia Minor and Syria shall also be examined in a slightly more cursory manner. Advantage will be taken of the close proximity of the principal ancient monuments of Athens and Attica, and several lectures will be conducted on-site, or will be expanded upon and illustrated by independent visits. In addition to these short trips, there will also be a single three/four day trip to several of the major temple sites on the Greek mainland.

Teaching will commence with a short series of lectures on the historical and geographical background, and the sources that will be utilised throughout the course. These will be followed by detailed discussion of a series of subjects that will include: the nature of the gods, the location of sanctuaries, the financing and management of sanctuaries, the role of sanctuaries in political life, festivals and religious processions, sacrifice, prophecy, oracles and divination, myth, afterlife beliefs, religion and war, heroes and heroization, ruler-cult, the role of women, the role of dedications, rites of passage, religion in the home, religious art and iconography, mystery religions, syncretism, and the introduction of new gods.

Students who follow this course should take away with them a sound knowledge of ancient Greek religion, a firm grasp of the history and culture of Greece during some of its most productive centuries, and an excellent acquaintance with the primary sources. They will have learnt the basics of how to approach and interpret archaeological sites, and will have had the opportunity to visit a number of the most interesting and informative of those that the region around Athens has to offer.
The three/four day trip could be taken to either Amphiarcion-Delphi (+museum)-Korinth/Nemea region OR Sparta-Bassai-Olympia region.

Most weeks will be a mixture of lecture/seminar.
Assessment: course work/final examination/mixture of the two?