

Spring 2020

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS

PHIL 2070

World's Religions

Professor:

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Scope of the Course:

The purpose of this course is to assist you in achieving an informed appreciation for the religious life of humankind as this is reflected in some of the most influential religious traditions in the world. It is intended neither to convert you to any particular religion nor to persuade you to reject any or all religion.

To achieve an informed appreciation for this material it is necessary to approach the material with the right frame of mind. If you approach this material with the assumption that all religion or that all religion but your own is wrong, is a distortion of reality, or that all religion is simply nonsense, you are unlikely to achieve a fair hearing of the insights that have given birth to these traditions, or the interesting ideas and practices that have shaped the lives of the human beings who for millennia have participated in these traditions. Assuming such a standpoint, we can hardly hope to be properly informed. If, on the other hand, we assume that all religions are equal and are equally acceptable, we are unlikely to take seriously the uniqueness of each tradition or their claim to a decisive revelation of truth. The attitude appropriate to this subject matter is one of genuine intellectual curiosity: curiosity about the nature of religion, curiosity about the relationship of religion to other aspects of life, curiosity about the distinguishing features of the many differing traditions, curiosity about the meaning of religion. We want to appreciate the understanding of reality and the understanding of the human condition these traditions embody. It is appropriate to place the question of the *truth* of religions within brackets until an adequate *understanding* of the religions in question is achieved.

However, in order to achieve an informed appreciation of differing religious traditions we need first to formulate a working definition of our subject. The purpose of a definition is to become clear in our minds about what it is that we are seeking to explore. An adequate definition of religion would have to be faithful to the religious tradition with which you are familiar from your own religious training and experience (if you have had such experience and training) but it must also be faithful to all those forms of behavior we would all recognize as religions that are not a part of your experience. For instance: if we were to define religion as "belief in God" or "belief in the supernatural," we should be prepared to show (1) that all religions involve *beliefs*, and (2) that among these beliefs there is a universal doctrine of God or the supernatural. On examination it turns out that neither

of these claims is true. There are many historical traditions that we would all recognize as religions that are *without specific beliefs* and there are religions that have certain beliefs, which include the rejection of any doctrine of God. Having formulated a workable definition of our subject, we will need to become familiar with some of the most influential traditions of religious life that we find in human civilization. This will entail the exploration of a considerable body of information concerning the manifestations of religion in human history. This will include information from cultures and historical epochs very different from our own. Our purpose in examining this material is to begin to grasp the *understanding of reality* embedded in these traditions and the *significance* of this understanding of reality for the adherents of these religious traditions.

Religion, however, is a vast field. The information now available concerning the religious traditions of humankind is too vast to encompass even in a lifetime. Thus the material we examine will be necessarily cursory and selective. Nevertheless, it will include a span of material sufficient to engender an appreciation of the great variety of the forms of religious life that exist in the world, as well as those pervasive features of such phenomena that justify our referring to them all as *religions*.

The material we turn to first will focus upon the religions of Asia. Classroom lectures in this part of the course will be supplemented by the reading of *Dharma and Ecology of Hindu Communities*. We will continue our study of the Hindu religious traditions, which will also provide background for an appreciation of Jainism, Buddhism, and the Sikh religious traditions. Your reading for this part of the course will include the relevant Chapters of *The World's Religions* by Huston Smith.

Following our introduction to Hinduism and related traditions we will turn briefly to the traditions of East Asia. The lectures you will hear on these subjects will be supplemented by your reading of relevant chapters from *The World's Religions* by Huston Smith. Following our treatment of these traditions, we shall be looking at the prophetic traditions that appear in the religions of Ancient Israel, the development of early Christianity, early Rabbinic Judaism, and Islam. Our study of Islam will explore the distinctive features of the Muslim tradition, and the role it has played in traditional life in the Middle East, and in social and political movements in the world today. The course will conclude with an effort to draw together a general conception of the nature of religion on the basis of the data we have encountered in the course of the semester.

Requirements:

1. Your understanding of the issues of this course will require a genuine encounter with the material presented in the lectures and discussed in class. This cannot occur if you fall behind in the class.
2. An informed appreciation for the religions of the world can occur only if you conscientiously apply yourself to the reading material assigned. Please read the material with care and think about the ideas being offered. Compare as much as possible the information you are hearing about the religion you are studying with your own knowledge of the religion, if any, in which you were raised. Try imaginatively to enter into the world of this religion. Leave aside for the moment the question whether this religion is right or wrong. Focus instead on the *meaning* it seems to have for the adherents of the religion in question.

3. The lecture and reading material you will encounter will be supplemented by important audio-visual presentations. These are intended to provide a window on the actual life of the religion in question. Such presentations will include several videos. Most of this material will be presented in class. Some may be assigned for your viewing in the media library outside of class.

4. The course will be divided for the purpose of organization into 5 major parts. There will be an exam over each of these parts in the course of the semester. Exams will use *a variety of testing strategies*. Some exams will be "in house" exams, some may be "take home" exams. Some will have a part to be taken home and another part to be answered in class. Most will consist of two parts, one focusing upon matters of fact, the other focusing on your personal and intellectual response to the religion you are studying in the light of your own personal experience. There will be 3 major exams in the course of the semester. Each of the exams that occur in the course of the semester will be worth about 20 points for a possible total of 60 points, towards 100 points for the course. The final exam will be worth about 40 points, and will cover the last of the topics we will study as well as a comprehensive review of all the work of the semester. In addition to regular scheduled exams short unannounced quizzes on the reading for the week *may be given at any time*. They will be worth about 5 bonus points each. The points earned from such "pop quizzes" may make the difference between an "A" and a "B" or between passing or failing the course. The final exam will include some questions of fact concerning all of the religious traditions we have encountered in the course of the semester.

5. For online version of this course, each module needs your weekly post that is due *Wednesday* of the next week.

Grades:

Grades will be based upon the quality of class participation, the results of quizzes, and your instructor's subjective evaluation of the level of informed appreciation you have achieved. In each module, you can earn a total of 8 points towards your final grade: 4 for the quiz/assessment and 4 for your discussion post. We offer you 4 points for filling out the zip code survey in the introductory module.

Policy on Grades of I (Incomplete):

A grade of "I" will be given for the course only in the case of extenuating circumstances such as accident or serious illness that make it impossible to complete all the requirements for the course and only when the material remaining to complete the course is minimal.

Drop Policy:

A student may drop the course with instructor's permission until the last day allowed by the university to drop the course with instructor's permission. (<http://registrar.unt.edu/regISTRATION/fall-registration-guide>).

Academic Dishonesty:

An explanation of the university's Academic Dishonesty policy is available at the following web site: <http://www.vpaa.unt.edu/academic-integrity.htm>

Americans with Disabilities Law and the Office of Disability Accommodation (ODA):

The University of North Texas is on record as being committed to both the spirit and letter of federal equal opportunity legislation; reference Public Law 92-112 – The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 as amended. With the passage of new federal legislation entitled Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), pursuant to section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, there is renewed focus on providing this population with the same opportunities enjoyed by all citizens.

Textbooks:

Books for the course are available at the UNT's Barnes and Noble Book Store:

Required:

Huston Smith, *The World's Religions*, (New York: Harper Collins) 2009.

Recommended:

Pankaj Jain, *Dharma and Ecology of Hindu Communities: Sustenance and Sustainability*, (Ashgate/Routledge) 2011, 2016. The book is also available as a free e-book (and as a hardcopy) at the UNT library: <http://iii.library.unt.edu/record=b4022378~S12>

Approximate Schedule of Topics and Reading Assignments:

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| Module 1 | What is Academic Study of Religion? PPTs on Canvas folder "Intro to Religions" |
| Module 2 | Video: Ahimsa (Jainism) http://iii.library.unt.edu/record=b4018694~S12
Jainism: Readings and Presentations on the Canvas. |
| Module 3 | Religions of Asian Communities (The Bishnois, Swadhyayis, and Bhils from <i>Dharma and Ecology of Hindu Communities</i>).
Videos: (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=53K3b3zQEfw and http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SvSyaGXSnWM)
Video: Swadhyaya http://iii.library.unt.edu/record=b3830693~S12
Video: Sacred Groves of Kerala: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4SxLOFUXH4s
Video: Green Struggles of Bhils: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uN1_oc80sHE
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UZPkEHDKe64 Hinduism with Huston Smith |

- Module 4 Introduction to **Hinduism**:
 Huston Smith, *The World's Religions*. "Hinduism," pp. 1 – 25.
 Video: <http://iii.library.unt.edu/record=b3402681~S12> The Hindu Religious Tradition; Huston Smith, *The World's Religions*.
 Video: Film: <http://www.learner.org/courses/worldlit/gita/watch/>
- Module 5 **Buddhism** as Philosophy and Religion: Early Buddhist Thought, Huston Smith, "Buddhism." pp. 82 – 119 Video: PBS Film The Buddha
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9xvNMoI3XIU>
- Module 6 **Daoism**, and the Religions of East Asia. Huston Smith, pp. 154 - 218. Film: *Daoism* (<http://iii.library.unt.edu/record=b3766595~S6>)
- Module 7 Film: *Confucianism*
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SAy4ug6PMM8&list=PL632450C6AD01D53>
- Module 8 **Chinese Buddhism**: The Mahayana Tradition: Huston Smith, pp. 119 – 149.
 Film: *To the Land of Bliss*
<http://iii.library.unt.edu/record=b3840340~S6>
- Module 9 **Shinto and Japanese Buddhism** Film: *Shinto*
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ajk6mtuYfuE>
 Film: *Zen: Principles and Practices*
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CfR_ZkROz3Q
 Film: *The Long Search: Vol 9: Land of Disappearing Buddha*
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G6KyQIo9Q7M>
- Module 10 Religion in The Ancient Near East, the **Hebrews**, the Origins of the Christian Faith, and Islam: Huston Smith, pp. 271 - 362.
- Module 11 The Origins of the **Islamic Faith**, The Five Pillars of Islam, and their Implications for Human Order: Huston Smith, pp. 221 – 257, pp. 271 - 362. **Islamic** Mysticism: Huston Smith, pp. 257 – 268.
- Module 12 **Christianity**
- Exam Week **Final Exam**

