

RELG181 EXPERIENCES OF THE SACRED

Fall Semester, 1998

Coordinator: [Dr. Jim Dalton](#)

Office: Clare Center, 2nd floor

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COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course will examine religious experiences and their expressions within a comparative, cross-cultural and interdisciplinary context. It will look at various human understandings of the Sacred and how these understandings are worked out within the settings of human history and culture. A selection of materials will be drawn from various religious traditions such as [Buddhism](#), [Christianity](#), [Hinduism](#), [Islam](#), [Judaism](#), [Native religions](#), and so forth. Although no single religious tradition will be treated comprehensively, materials from various traditions will be selected to illustrate important thematic issues in religious experiences of Sacred Reality. The major goal of this course is to give the student an appreciation of the nature and variety of religious experience and its roots in understandings of the Sacred. Further, the course will situate religious experience in the context of human cultural, economic and historical reality.

Goals of the Course

Relg181 is intended to fulfill the disciplinary course requirement in Religious Studies for [the Core Curriculum](#). The goals of such a disciplinary course are as follows:

1. An appreciation of the breadth and range of religious experience.
2. An awareness of the assumptions that individuals and groups bring to the study of religious experience.
3. An appreciation of the diversity within and among religious communities.
4. An appreciation of the themes of continuity and change within religious institutions, traditions, and communities.
5. An understanding of some of the questions posed by Religious Studies such as a) How do religious communities understand the divine, the human situation, and the world? b) What is the interplay between religious texts and religious communities? c) How do religious communities understand ritual action and moral development and decision-

making? d) What is the interrelationship of religion with other dimensions of human experience, such as geography, politics, economics, technology, and the arts?

Textbooks

-- Cunningham, Lawrence S. et Al. The Sacred Quest: An Invitation to the Study of Religion. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1995.

-- Fieser, James and John Powers. Scriptures of the World Religions. NY: McGraw Hill, 1998.

-- Fisher, Mary Pat. Living Religions. Third Edition. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1997.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

A. All students will be required to have computer accounts on Siena's Vax computer and will be expected to be able to utilize electronic mail and word processing. We will also be utilizing the [Word Wide Web \(WWW\)](#) during the course of the semester for learning and research. The [Web](#) will be discussed and used both inside and outside of classes.

B. Each student will be expected to choose [a religious tradition](#) (not his or her own or Buddhism) for the semester. The Fisher and Fieser texts will provide information on the student's tradition, together with his or her own research. The first quiz which will be held on *Tuesday, September 29* will, in part, focus on the student's tradition.

C. The professor will use the tradition of Buddhism to illustrate the themes of the course. Students should read Mary Pat Fisher's account of Buddhism (pp. 126-163). Buddhist texts will be drawn from Fieser and Powers (pp. 73-126). The students' preliminary knowledge of Buddhism will also be examined in the first quiz.

D. The mid-term examination will be held on *Thursday, October 22*.

E. During the course of the semester each student will work on a project relating his or her tradition to one or more of the issues raised in the course. A preliminary progress report will be sent to the Professor *via electronic mail* by *Thursday, November 12*. The final typewritten project will be due at class time on *Tuesday, December 8*.

F. Students will be required to attend classes on a regular basis. If the student is unable to attend, he or she will still be responsible for what occurs during that class period. As a general guideline, any more than four absences will be considered excessive. Further absences could effect the student's final grade.

G. The professor presupposed that every student will do his or her own work according to

accepted academic standards. Any student who copies someone else's work or is any other way guilty of cheating or plagiarism will be subject to the penalties outlined in the Siena College Catalog's [statement on Academic Integrity](#). At a minimum, the student will receive a grade of "F" for the course.

GRADING POLICY

- I. My touchstone grade is a "C". This grade is awarded for performance which is expected of all students in a particular course. It means that the student's work is "ok" (no significant problems or special promise). It is not a negative grade but reflects what can be expected of a typical student doing adequate work.
- II. A "B" reflects my judgment that the student's work is better than what I would expect from my "typical" student. The student's work is "good" and shows promise.
- III. An "A" exhibits outstanding work or, better put, work that "stands out" from typical students in a course such as this. It displays characteristics such as original thinking, a firm grasp of materials and an ability to critique these materials. It is attainable, not only by students who are "brilliant" but by any student who works hard and is engaged with the materials of the course. It also reflects an ability to communicate clearly and thoughtfully.
- IV. A "D" is given to communicate to a student that there are "problems" with the student's work. Such problems might be in communication or understanding of course materials and could arise due to inadequate study habits, poor preparation, or social difficulties. It is important for the student to locate the source of these problems. Students are strongly encouraged to discuss this grade with the coordinator.
- V. An "F" is my "do it over again" grade. It means that there are so many problems that we (the student and I) need to go back to the beginning of the process and walk our way through it again.

Course Outline

Please Note: This syllabus admits of additions and deletions as determined by demands of the course.

1. The Question of the Sacred.

Reading: Cunningham, pp. 1-59.

- **Forms of the Sacred: religion and religions.**
- **Encounters with the sacred: religious experience.**
- **What is religious experience and how is it distinguished from other forms of human experience?**
- **Approaches to the question: religious experience from within and from without (the believer and the scholar).**

- **Models of religious experience from religious traditions: [Buddhism](#).**

2. Experiences of the Sacred: thought, language and story.

Reading: Cunningham, pp. 61-77.

- **Sacred Reality and systematic thought.**
- **The truth about the world in the forms of story (myth).**
- **The language of the Sacred.**

3. Experiences of the Sacred: action, ethics and morality.

Reading: Cunningham, pp. 131-147.

- **"If God is God, how should the world be?"**
- **Morality in light of the Sacred.**
- **Moral action and the shape of the world: justification and revolution.**

4. Experiences of the Sacred: religious action in symbolic forms (ritual).

Reading: Cunningham, pp. 79-93.

- **Forms of symbolic action in life and culture.**
- **Ritual as religious symbolic action.**
- **Ritual forms in religious, historical and cultural settings.**

5. Religious experience and human community: forms of religious gathering.

Reading: Cunningham, pp. 95-111.

- **Religious communities and the experience of the Sacred.**
- **Religious communities: their cultural and historical settings.**
- **Community as a manifestation of the Sacred.**

6. Religious experience, human community and society: the Sacred, Evil and Salvation.

Reading: Cunningham, pp. 113-129, 149-165.

- **Forms of evil: natural, social and individual.**
- **Why do bad things happen to good people?**
- **Religious accounts of the origins of evil.**
- **Salvation and the search for meaning.**
- **Salvation and union with the Sacred.**