

INTRODUCTION TO WORLD RELIGIONS

Instructor

Thomas V. Peterson,
Division of Human Studies,
Alfred University,
Alfred, NY 14802
Fpett@king.alfred.edu

Alfred is a small comprehensive university with a strong private liberal arts college.

Course level and type

Introductory level, Semester-long course. Four hrs per week over 14 week term. The course is taught every semester. I have taught this model last semester and am teaching it now again.

Enrollment

40-50 students per semester

Pedagogical Reflections

I am adding this syllabus, since it is a different model of teaching the intro to World Religions course than the [last one](#) I submitted. It also has different pedagogical interests. I therefore see this syllabus as supplementing, rather than replacing Bill Cassidy's and my last syllabus. I am using a modified version of James Foard's (Arizona State) paragraph writing assignments to make the course more writing intensive. I have become enthusiastic about these assignments, because students can practice writing skills numerous times in a semester. It also forces students to become engaged with the material. (I regret losing Mark Juergensmeier's "create your own religion" assignment, but one can only do so much in a semester. I am also using a new textbook that is very successful in engaging student interests. (The only problem with the textbook is that the 3-chapter introductory section should be simplified and reduced to a one-chapter introduction, with the rest of the material going into later chapters.)

Note: A first version of this course can be found [here](#).

This is an introductory course in religious studies. The primary objectives of the course are:

1. To gain a fundamental understanding of the general nature of religion and of various religious traditions.
2. To come to appreciate the richness and diversity as well as the commonalities of religious life in various cultures and historical periods.
3. To gain understanding about how and why people construct their religious worlds through myth, ritual, symbolism, beliefs, ethics etc.
4. To become aware of the need for religious dialogue in our contemporary world.
5. "To make the strange familiar and the familiar strange."
6. To develop writing and thinking skills: description, comparison, interpretation and criticism.

REQUIRED BOOKS

Nancy Ring et al., [Introduction to the Study of Religion](#)

Diana Eck, Darshan: [Seeing the Divine Image in India](#)

Shunryu Suzuki, [Zen Mind, Beginners Mind](#)

TOPICS AND READING ASSIGNMENTS

The readings should be read by the first date assigned in the section.

A. What is religion? What is being religious?

Aug. 31, Sept. 2, 3--Film, Leap of Faith; Ring, ch. 3 (due Sept. 3)
Writing Assignment 1 due Sept. 3

B. Religion: Creation Order and Meaning in Life

Sept. 7, 9, 10--Ring, chs. 1 & 2
Writing Assignment 2 due Sept. 10

C. Religious Action: Ritual

Sept. 14, 16, 17, 21--Ring, ch. 4
Exam I (on sections A, B, and C above) Sept. 23

D. Religious Action: Ethics

Sept. 24, 28, 30--Ring, ch. 5
Writing Assignment 3 due Sept. 30 (If you're observing Yom Kippur, please hand in the assignment ahead of time.)

E. Religion and Personal Reconciliation

Oct. 1, 5, 7--Ring, ch. 10
Exam II (on sections D and E above) Oct. 8

F. Religion and Personal Alienation

Oct. 12, 14--Ring, ch. 11

G. Religious Language: Metaphor, Parable, Myth, Icon

Oct. 15, 21, 22--Ring, ch. 6
Oct. 26, 28--Eck, entire
Writing Assignment 4 due Oct. 28

H. Religious Language: Scriptures, Canons, Creeds

Oct. 29, Nov. 2--Ring, ch. 7
Exam III (on Sections F and G above) Nov. 4

I. Religious Transformation: Conversion, Salvation, Enlightenment

Nov. 5, 9, 11--Ring, ch. 8
Nov. 12, 16, 18--Suzuki, entire
Writing Assignment 5 due Nov. 18
Nov. 19, 23--Films, "I am a Monk" and "Hinduism and the Song of God"

J. Religious Transformation: Communal and Cultural

Nov. 30, Dec. 2--Ring, ch. 9

Dec. 3--Black Elk, Preface, Intro, chs. 1-5

Dec. 7--Black Elk, chs. 6-12

Dec. 9--Black Elk, chs. 13-25

Writing Assignment 6 due Dec. 9

Dec. 10--Film, "Wiping away the Tears"

Exam IV (on sections I and J above) Dec. 17, 10:15-12:15

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

A. ATTENDANCE IN CLASS

This class is not just about gathering information, but it is also about developing skills in thinking about issues in the humanities. Attendance in class is required. "Getting the notes from someone" will not substitute for attendance.

B. EXAMS

Four exams throughout the semester will comprise 2/3 of the grade for the course (each exam will therefore count 1/6). They will cover reading assignments and classroom activities. They will include an objective part, short answers, and very short essays. The dates for exams are Sept. 23, Oct. 8, Nov. 4, Dec. 17 (10:15-12:15). These exams (including the one in the slot for final exams) cover material in each section and are not primarily cumulative (except that you'd need to know major concepts from earlier sections).

C. WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

Thanks to James Foard at Arizona State University for his development of this assignment, though I have modified it.

Six writing assignments will be due during the semester--1/3 of grade in course. Don't panic! Each assignment is only one paragraph (usual length 130 to 170 words). If you exceed 220 words, you will not get credit for completing the assignment. You are to type them (double spaced) on the sheet I will provide--it includes a grading section. This section will include 5 criteria; graders will assign 0-3 points for each. Each writing assignment will not only get you engaged in the material but is also designed to help you develop specific reasoning and thinking skills. Normally you will have 2 classmates and the instructor giving you points for each of the criteria, but the instructor's will be the one that counts. Therefore do not put your names on the papers--use your student numbers. Evaluators will also use their student numbers. The overall grade for the writing assignments will be determined after the last assignment is completed. The grade will be determined by 1) the quality of the six individual paragraphs--e.g. the scores on each, 2) the improvement of your ability to think about issues in the humanities and your ability to express them in writing, 3) your care in marking other students' work. Since the heaviest weight will be on #1, you will roughly know how you're doing by using the following scale:

15=A+; 14=A; 13=A-; 12=B+; 11=B; 10=B-; 9=C+; 8=C.

Writing Assignment # 1 due Sept. 3--TASK: DESCRIPTION

"Describe the religious community pictured at the encampment at the end of the film, "Leap of Faith."

Note that description entails 2 skills. First, seeing and observing; second an objective category (or categories) to make the description coherent. In the question above, the category "religious community" has been chosen for you. You may need to develop some subcategories to make your description coherent.

Criteria for evaluating this assignment:

1. Thesis Answers Question. In the first sentence, there must be a clear thesis that answers the question clearly, concisely, and definitely. The thesis should not declare your agreement or disagreement, fascination or disgust with the issue, text or observation. It should also not announce that you will be listing several points or issues. In the question above you might begin with something like this: "The community in the film was a religious one, because I observed . . . "
2. Staying on Topic. You should not introduce extraneous material that has nothing to do with topic (and your thesis). In the above question, for example, noticing that 30% of the people are overweight would be irrelevant to topic. Every sentence should support your thesis.
3. Fairness and depth. You must be fair to the thoughts, ideas, character etc. of the religion that we are studying and not let your bias (positive or negative) interfere with that fairness. (Evaluation, or "criticism," is not asked in this question. When it is, you must be fair, even though you might argue a case that something is "destructive.") In question above, you should be fair to the portrayal of the community and not let your bias interfere with that fairness.
4. Logic and organization. Your paragraph should be organized, whether or not you are arguing a case (where causal relations must be clear) or organizing material. In the above question, try to organize material around sub-categories of what makes a community religious.
5. Mechanically Correct. The writing must be grammatical, with correct spelling and punctuation. Go to writing center if this is a problem!

Writing Assignment # 2 due Sept. 10--TASK: COMPARISON (level 1)

"Compare the Vedic Hymn and the Haudenosaunee creation story to explore how they provide a model for social order."

Comparing two things requires choosing some objective category so that those comparisons can be meaningful. Here the basic category of "social order" is given by the question, so you don't have to find the primary category of comparison. (You may need subcategories if your paragraph gets too complex.) The task of "level 1" comparisons, then is to write everything from the point of view of the category ("level 2" requires person to identify the objective category to make comparisons). A second skill here is for you to find similarities and differences between comparable things.

Criteria for grading: Same 5 criteria as in Assignment # 1. Apply them to this question.

1. Thesis Answers Question.
2. Staying on Topic.
3. Fairness and depth.
4. Logic and organization.

5. Mechanically Correct.

Writing Assignment # 3 due Sept. 30--TASK: COMPARISON (level 2)

Note: If you are observing Yom Kippur, please turn in assignment before this date.

"Compare the Muslim Hajj with the Jewish Yom Kippur."

This question requires the same skills as in Assignment # 2. In addition you must find the objective categories that will allow you to make comparisons. ("Ritual" is just too broad a category to be of much use when you find similarities and differences between comparable things.)

Criteria for grading. (Same criteria as above with addition in 2 of finding appropriate categories.)

1. Thesis Answers Question.
2. Appropriate categories and Staying on Topic.
3. Fairness and depth.
4. Logic and organization.
5. Mechanically Correct.

Writing Assignment # 4 due Oct. 28--TASK: INTERPRETATION (level 1)

"Explain why Hindus might feel that many different gods and goddesses are necessary to provide different symbolic lenses for them to think about ultimate reality."

Skills. You need to do all of the things mentioned in previous assignments, but here you need to adopt a Hindu point of view and develop a coherent argument of explanation to support that point of view. In this paragraph you need to support your thesis with careful reasoning.

Criteria for grading. (Same criteria as above with categories 3 and 4 becoming more difficult.)

1. Thesis Answers Question.
2. Appropriate categories and Staying on Topic.
3. Fairness and depth.
4. Logic and organization.
5. Mechanically Correct.

Writing Assignment # 5 due Nov. 18--TASK: INTERPRETATION (level 2)

"Explain the meaning of this statement by Shunryu Suzuki: 'When you try to attain enlightenment, then you have a big burden on your mind. Your mind will not be clear enough to see things as they are. If you truly see things as they are, then you will see things as they should be.'"

This requires the same skills of interpretation as the previous assignment. It is more difficult, because you can find many different perspectives on answering it. None would be wrong (some might be "deeper" or "shallower") as long as Suzuki's statement is interpreted in light of the theory and practice of Buddhist meditation.

Criteria for grading. (Same criteria as above.)

1. Thesis Answers Question.
2. Appropriate categories and Staying on Topic.
3. Fairness and depth.
4. Logic and organization.
5. Mechanically Correct.

Writing Assignment # 6 due Dec. 9--TASK: CRITICISM

"Evaluate Black Elk's criticism of his use of the great vision: 'This was where I made my great mistake. I had a very great vision, and I should have depended only upon that to guide me to the good.'"

This is the most complex type of writing in the humanities. The skills not only require you to do all the things you've done before, but you must 1) find a point of view or basis for evaluating B. E.'s statement (i.e., are you considering B.E.'s psychology? Or the historical circumstances within which he had his vision? Or the cultural framework for his vision?), 2) you need to be clear about using that point of view (or basis for making evaluations), 3) make careful nuanced judgments.

Criteria for grading. (Same criteria, but # 2, 3, and 4 are much more difficult.)

1. Thesis Answers Question.
2. Appropriate categories and Staying on Topic.
3. Fairness and depth.
4. Logic and organization.
5. Mechanically Correct.