

SYLLABUS

REL 117

Introduction to World Religions

Berea College
Fall 2002
MWF 11
Art Building 206

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Preliminary Pedagogical Remarks

Institution: Private liberal arts college
Course level/type: yr. 1/lecture-seminar
Hours of Instruction: 3 hrs/week over a 14 week term
Enrollment/year last taught: 14 students/2002

Reflections:

This course seeks to introduce students to the comparative study of religion as well as to acquaint them with four important religious traditions: Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam.

In order to reinforce the first goal of the course (introducing students to cross-cultural religious studies), methodological issues are considered at the beginning of the term and a short methodological paper concerned with defining "religion" is written. Revisions of this initial paper are required throughout the course following units on the various religious traditions profiled.

The traditions themselves are introduced through a three-prong approach: (1) historical-doctrinal overviews, (2) intensive discussion of primary texts, and (3) examination of each tradition in its contemporary North American context. To these ends, I use Michael Molloy's well-designed textbook (which supports lectures) and Gary Kessler's excellent anthology of primary texts (which provide fodder for discussion). (Although all such anthologies have their flaws, and Kessler's is no exception, I prefer it to others now available.) Diana Eck's popular-audience book is very useful for the third prong of this approach to introducing "world religions," as she focuses on Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam as lived religions in the contemporary United States, as well as on how Christians have responded to non-Christian presences in their communities, and how they might respond differently in the future.

Whenever possible, elective opportunities to visit local representative religious institutions and relevant museum collections are made available. This always is a popular element in the course, although the entire class never elects to participate as a whole on any single occasion.

Thus, the course does not function as a purely descriptive effort in the comparative study of religion; it also promotes a constructive agenda — in this case, a kind of liberal-Christian theologizing about the meaning of religious diversity in an inclusive, multicultural commonwealth. While others in the field might deplore the mixing of such agendas, I find that it both enlivens students' interest in the course and corresponds to the real grounds for the course's relevance in the first place (at least in the marketplace mentality of many students and some administrators): studying "world religions" matters, because religion in America IS "world religions." Since September 11, this point has become more difficult for my students (and, I suspect, for everyone else) to miss.

Course Content

In this course, **you will learn how to read, interpret, and discuss important writings** from four of our planet's most popular religious traditions. In a sense, **religious traditions are a lot like languages**: we can learn them from birth, we can acquire them as teenagers or adults, or we can spend our lives in ignorance and isolation, only able to understand one.

If ignorance of the world's diverse religious heritage ever was an option, it no longer is. Religion has been, is, and will continue to be a powerful and perennial force in human cultures. Whether we distance ourselves from religious traditions or embrace them, **we cannot avoid the influence of religious ideas, practices, images, language, and values in our everyday life, work, and play.** This is especially true in the **United States**, which has become **the most religiously diverse nation in the world.**

Course Goals

- A basic **acquaintance** with the **Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, and Islamic** religious traditions
- A basic **appreciation** of **American religious diversity** in the early 21st century
- A basic **competence** in **speaking, listening, reading, and writing** about **primary texts**



World map indicating general distribution of religious affiliation by tradition

Course Materials (for sale at Berea College Bookstore)

- Diana L. Eck, *A New Religious America* (HarperSan Francisco, 2001)
- Gary E. Kessler, ed., *Ways of Being Religious* (Mayfield Publishing Company, 1999)
- Michael Molloy, *Experiencing the World's Religions*, 2nd ed. (Mayfield Publishing, 2002)

Course Requirements

- **Informed participation in class discussions.** This consists of preparing for class by reading the assigned texts thoughtfully, preparing questions and comments to share in class, bringing the assigned texts to class with you, and responding to questions and comments from the instructor and fellow students in a respectful and cooperative fashion.

- **Helping to maintain a learning-centered and civil classroom community** by minimizing distractions (e.g., making sure cell phones are turned off before entering the classroom; using laptop computers only for non-networked, offline note-taking purposes) and observing common courtesies (e.g., allowing others to complete their thoughts or make their points before offering your own; avoiding attacks on others' character or intelligence in criticizing their comments) in classroom discourse and other activities.
- **Submission of weekly e-mailed responses to assigned readings**, due by 8 a.m. on the dates indicated in the *Course Calendar*, and consisting of questions and concerns raised for you by each week's assigned readings. The text of each e-mailed response should be no less than 250 words, and should be composed in clear standard English prose without any mechanical errors. These responses will be graded pass/fail, and cannot be made up a later time or date.
- **Completion of definition of "religion" exercise (2-3 double-spaced pages in length)**, due in class on Friday, September 6. Revised and expanded versions of this exercise will be due in class on the dates indicated in the *Course Calendar*. Further guidelines for this exercise will be distributed in advance of September 6.
- **Completion of 1 midterm examination**, to be administered in class on Friday, October 18. Further guidelines for this examination will be distributed in advance of October 18.
- **Completion of 1 final examination**, to be administered in Art Building 206 on Monday, December 9 at 10 a.m. Further guidelines for this examination will be distributed in advance of December 11.
- **Maintaining your personal integrity** by avoiding plagiarism (representing another's work as your own), cheating (altering the conditions of an examination to create unfair personal advantage), and other forms of academic dishonesty. The instructor reserves the right to reject any work that he deems to have been tainted by such dishonesty and to file the appropriate report with the Associate Provost for Academic Services. For more information on how to avoid plagiarism, see *The B.C. Student Success Manual*, pp. 23-24 ("Avoiding Plagiarism (Thought Theft)," by Patricia Wilson).



Course Evaluation

Class participation.....	20% of final grade
Weekly reading responses.....	20% of final grade
Midterm examination.....	20% of final grade
Definition of "religion" and its revisions.....	20% of final grade
Final examination.....	20% of final grade

- A = consistently outstanding achievement in the course
- B = work of good to very good quality, but not consistently outstanding
- C = acceptable level of competence and basic understanding of material

D = minimally adequate; student may not be ready for further related coursework

F = unsatisfactory and unworthy of credit



Course Attendance

- You are expected to attend every scheduled class session in its entirety – from beginning to end – except in cases in which advance permission to be absent has been sought and obtained by you from the instructor.
- While there is no official penalty for unexcused absences, students who are absent on even an occasional basis will find that the quality of written and in-class work will suffer noticeably; students who are absent on a regular basis are likely to perform poorly in the course overall, and may earn a failing grade.

Course Calendar

Assignments and dates may be subject to change. You are responsible for all changes made to the calendar as provided by the instructor during class sessions.

Week 1 Introduction: Religions in America Today	† ☸ ☸ ☸
8/28 Introductory session (no preparation required)	
8/30 <i>A New Religious America</i> , pp. 1-79 (“Introduction to a New America” & “From Many, One”) <u>Video: America’s New Religious Landscape</u> (in class)	
<u>READING RESPONSE DUE BY 8 A.M.!</u>	

Week 2 Defining “Religion”	† ☸ ☸ ☸
9/2 <i>Experiencing the World’s Religions</i> , pp. 1-25	
9/4 <i>Ways of Being Religious</i> , pp. 17-36 (“What Is Religion?” & “How Should We Study Religion?”)	

9/6 **DEFINITION OF RELIGION EXERCISE DUE IN CLASS!**

Week 3 ***The Christian Tradition (I): Roots*** †
9/9 *Experiencing the World's Religions*, pp. 321-357
9/11 *Ways of Being Religious*, pp. 410-431 (New Testament Writings and Other Early Texts)
9/13 Video: *From Jesus to Christ*, part IV (in class)
READING RESPONSE DUE BY 8 A.M.!

Week 4 ***The Christian Tradition (II): Branches*** †
9/16 *Experiencing the World's Religions*, pp. 357-368
9/18 *Ways of Being Religious*, pp. 432-440 (Medieval Texts)
9/20 *Ways of Being Religious*, pp. 441-447 (Reformation and Counter-Reformation Texts)
READING RESPONSE DUE BY 8 A.M.!

Week 5 ***The Christian Tradition (III): Flowers*** †
9/23 *Experiencing the World's Religions*, pp. 59-79
9/25 *Ways of Being Religious*, pp. 447-458 (Neo-Christian and Modernist Texts)
9/27 Video: *Christianity – The Second Thousand Years*, volume IV (in class)
REVISION #1 OF RELIGION DEFINITION DUE IN CLASS!

Week 6 ***The Hindu Tradition (I): Roots*** ॐ
9/30 *Experiencing the World's Religions*, pp. 59-79
10/2 *Ways of Being Religious*, pp. 116-122 (Vedic and Upanishadic Texts)
10/4 Video: *330 Million Gods* (in class)
READING RESPONSE DUE BY 8 A.M.!

Week 7 ***The Hindu Tradition (II): Branches*** ॐ
10/7 *Experiencing the World's Religions*, pp. 80-103
10/9 **NO CLASS – MOUNTAIN DAY**
10/11 *Ways of Being Religious*, pp. 131-136, 140-141, 144-150 (*Bhakti, Vedanta* and Modern Texts)
READING RESPONSE DUE BY 8 A.M.!

Week 8 ***The Hindu Tradition (III): Flowers*** ॐ
10/14 **NO CLASS – MIDTERM READING PERIOD**
10/16 *A New Religious America*, pp. 80-141 (“American Hindus: The Ganges and the Mississippi”)
REVISION #2 OF RELIGION DEFINITION DUE IN CLASS!
10/18 **MIDTERM EXAMINATION** (in class)

Week 9 ***The Buddhist Tradition (I): Roots*** ☸
10/21 *Experiencing the World's Religions*, pp. 105-127
10/23 *Ways of Being Religious*, pp. 183-187 (Theravada Texts)
10/25 Video: *Footprint of the Buddha* (in class)
READING RESPONSE DUE BY 8 A.M.!

Week 10 ***The Buddhist Tradition (II): Branches*** ☸

10/28 *Experiencing the World's Religions*, pp. 127-150
10/30 *Ways of Being Religious*, pp. 192-202 (South Asian Mahayana Texts)
11/1 *Ways of Being Religious*, pp. 202-218 (East Asian Mahayana & Vajrayana Texts)
READING RESPONSE DUE BY 8 A.M.!

Week 11 ***The Buddhist Tradition (III): Flowers*** ☸
11/4 *Experiencing the World's Religions*, pp. 150-165
11/6 *A New Religious America*, pp. 142-221 (“American Buddhists: Enlightenment and Encounter”)
11/8 Video: *Becoming the Buddha in L.A.* (in class)
REVISION #3 OF RELIGION DEFINITION DUE IN CLASS!

Week 12 ***The Islamic Tradition (I): Roots*** ☪
11/11 *Experiencing the World's Religions*, pp. 405-431
11/13 *Ways of Being Religious*, pp. 483-492 (Excerpts from the Quran)
11/15 Video: *The Five Pillars of Islam* (in class)
READING RESPONSE DUE BY 8 A.M.!

Week 13 ***The Islamic Tradition (II): Branches*** ☪
11/18 *Experiencing the World's Religions*, pp. 431-455
11/20 *Ways of Being Religious*, pp. 492-504, 511 (Excerpts from *Hadith*, *Shari'a* and Sufi poetry)
READING RESPONSE DUE BY 8 A.M.!
11/22 **NO CLASS – INSTRUCTOR AWAY**

**NOVEMBER 25, 27, 29: NO CLASS MEETINGS
(INSTRUCTOR AWAY/THANKSGIVING)**

Week 14 ***The Islamic Tradition (III): Flowers*** ☪
12/2 *A New Religious America*, pp. 222-293 (“American Muslims: Cousins and Strangers”)
12/4 Video: *Islam in America* (in class)
REVISION #4 OF RELIGION DEFINITION DUE IN CLASS!
12/6 **NO CLASS – READING PERIOD**

FINAL EXAMINATION: Monday, December 9 10 a.m. Art Bldg. 206