

Issues in Contemporary Theology:

Hybridity, Syncretism and Religious Identity

Religious Studies 350

Winter, 1999

DePaul University

Instructor: Dr. Jeffrey Carlson

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Hours: By appointment

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A. INTRODUCTION AND OBJECTIVES:

This course provides an opportunity to explore a variety of forms of "religious mixing" and thereby to reflect on the nature of religious identity. When the Buddha moves from India to China, when Jesus moves from Jerusalem to Athens, something new arises. When a people are forced to "convert" to the religion of their conquerors, something of the old endures in new forms. When someone today says, "My spirituality is drawn from Hinduism, Buddhism, Christian and Muslim mysticism, and Native American religions," some amalgam, some product of a process of mixing, is being constructed. What can we learn from these phenomena?

While we will consider historical, sociological and anthropological approaches, among others, our primary emphasis, as our course title suggests, will be through a study of theology – i.e. the attempt to reflect on the meaning of religious beliefs and practices.

Some would warn against the dangers of religious mixing out of a concern to preserve the essential core of religious identity in a pure, unadulterated form. Others would see religious mixing as a necessary survival tactic given inequalities in power. Still others would see religious mixing as inevitable and intrinsic though usually unrecognized. We will consider these and other viewpoints as we examine this phenomenon in both breadth and depth.

Our readings and discussions will take us through an analysis of contemporary American "Generation X" experience; a personal testimony of one who claims to be "both Buddhist and Christian"; an analysis of a panoply of issues surrounding contemporary "global culture" and related issues informing our understanding of religious identity; a proposal regarding the inherently "translatable" nature of the Christian tradition; and an investigation of the amalgam of African, Caribbean and Catholic influences in Haiti. The five books we will read and discuss together form *one* key component of the course. *The other* component involves your own personal intellectual project.

Early on, you will be asked to identify a question/issue/problem/domain that you would like to investigate

throughout the quarter – one that will be enhanced by our books and discussions, but one you'd like to read a bit more about on your own. The course thereby provides you with an opportunity to investigate the phenomenon of religious mixing and to reflect on religious identity in terms of both *breadth* – the five books we'll read and discuss – and *depth* – as you carry out your own particular inquiry.

In this course, you need to work on developing a sense of "structured empathy," appreciating how people could believe and do things you may not, and also a critical and historical consciousness. One of my old teachers wrote a book describing the gaining of knowledge and the making of meaning as a kind of "conversation." Here's how he put it:

*Conversation is a game with some hard rules: say only what you mean; say it as accurately as you can; listen to and respect what the other says, however different or other; be willing to correct or defend your opinions if challenged by the conversation partner; be willing to argue if necessary, to confront if demanded, to endure necessary conflict, to change your mind if the evidence suggests it. [David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity*, 1987, p. 19]*

So, let's go with the metaphor and imagine that our course is an opportunity for *conversation* between text and reader, and between the many interpreters in our class.

Our overall and ongoing learning goals can be summarized as follows:

1. To gain **accurate knowledge** about the important themes, figures, texts, and other materials under consideration, so that you are able to present and support significant facts correctly, clearly and thoroughly.
2. To develop **accurate analyses** of the various interpretations and positions proposed and considered, explaining how complex arguments and interpretations are constructed.
3. To propose **plausible comparisons** between the different perspectives considered, suggesting viable connections, applications and patterns.
4. To construct your own **articulate and respectful assessment** of the materials under consideration, and of the viewpoints of others, developing and supporting your own reasoned evaluations and creative responses based on clearly formulated criteria.
5. To develop your capacity for clear and effective **writing**.
6. To develop your capacity for clear and effective **verbal** communication.

B. STUDENT REQUIREMENTS AND GRADING:

Throughout the quarter, you'll be able to demonstrate, to yourself and others, that you are achieving these learning goals. Here are the major ways you'll do it:

1. **Assignment preparation.** Please come to each class session having done the assigned readings, taken careful notes, and having tried your best to find out the meanings of terms and concepts in the readings that are unfamiliar to you.
2. **Class discussions.** Asking questions, raising concerns, offering your own ideas during class discussions is a crucial component of the learning process. You will be expected to be an active participant in classroom conversations.
3. **Conversation Starters.** "Conversation Starters" are one-page, single-spaced, typed papers that summarize the *key* themes from the assigned reading for a particular class session, suggest connections between the current reading and other readings and discussions from our course, and set forth several

questions for discussion. For most class sessions, two previously selected students will write Conversation Starters and bring copies to be distributed at the start of class. You will have several opportunities to do this during the quarter.

35% of your final grade will be based on an assessment of your overall **course preparedness and involvement**, including regular and prompt attendance, informed participation in discussions, and high quality Conversation Starters. *Students arriving late for class, missing class, not completing the assigned readings, or failing to prepare good Conversation Starters will receive a lower grade in this area.*

4. **Paper.** You will write a **Paper** (12-15 pages, typed and double-spaced) on a particular question/issue/problem/domain of interest to you. *The Paper will investigate this topic in more depth, and relate it to significant aspects of the discussions and books read in common in the course. To complete your Paper, you'll need to read a bit more on your own during the quarter – somewhere in the vicinity of 100 pages.* The finished Paper is due **by 10:00 a.m. on Friday, March 19 in my office (SAC 430)**, but there will be several stages leading toward its completion:

- On **Wednesday, January 13** you will bring to class a one-page, single-spaced **Paper Proposal** (with copies to distribute) – a statement of what you plan to work on for the Paper. Here, you will propose the question/issue/problem/domain you plan to investigate, explain why it is an important topic, list at least two things you know about it already and at least two things you think you need to learn more about. You will write this in ink not blood, so your focus and approach can change a bit as the quarter develops.
- Throughout the quarter, you'll call, e-mail and/or meet with me to seek advice on the paper or just to talk about how it's going.
- On **Friday, February 5** (by 10:00 a.m.) you'll turn in (at my office) a **First Progress Report** (2-3 pages, typed and double-spaced) in which you describe in detail what you've done and learned regarding your paper thus far.
- On **Friday, March 5** (by 10:00 a.m.) you'll turn in (at my office) a **Second Progress Report** (2-3 pages, typed and double-spaced) in which you describe in detail what you've done and learned regarding your paper thus far.

Each Progress Report will be worth 15% of your final grade. The finished **Paper** will be worth 35% of your final grade.

C. ACADEMIC INTEGRITY:

Please read the Academic Integrity Policy in the current *Student Handbook*. It describes violations of academic integrity, including plagiarism, noting that students who present the work of another as their own are subject to receiving a failing grade for that assignment, or for the entire course, or perhaps even being suspended or dismissed from the university. Please cite the work of others properly.

D. REQUIRED TEXTS:

1. Tom Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X*. San Francisco: Jossey-

- Bass, 1998.
2. Thich Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*. New York: Riverhead Books, 1995.
 3. Robert J. Schreiter, *The New Catholicity: Theology between the Global and the Local*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997.
 4. Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989.
 5. Leslie G. Desmangles, *The Faces of the Gods: Vodou and Roman Catholicism in Haiti*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992.

These books are available at DePaul's Lincoln Park Campus Bookstore and on Reserve in the Richardson Library.

E. SCHEDULE OF TOPICS, READINGS AND DUE DATES:

1. Overview and Foci

WED January 6

Introduction and Syllabus.

MON January 11

Read: Beaudoin pp. ix-xxiii, Nhat Hanh pp. 1-12, Schreiter pp. ix-xii, Sanneh pp. 1-8, Desmangles pp. xi-16.

WED January 13

Paper topic proposals (single page). Bring copies to share and discuss.

2. A Theology of Culture in the Context of "Generation X"

MON January 18

Read: Beaudoin pp. 1-72.

Conversation Starters: _____ and _____

WED January 20

Read: Beaudoin pp. 73-120.

Conversation Starters: _____ and _____

MON January 25

Read: Beaudoin pp. 121-191.

Conversation Starters: _____ and _____

3. Multiple Roots: Explorations in "Buddhist-Christian" Identity

WED January 27

Read: Nhat Hanh pp. 1-59.

Conversation Starters: _____ and _____

MON February 1

Read: Nhat Hanh pp. 60-130.

Conversation Starters: _____ and _____

WED February 3

Read: Nhat Hanh pp. 131-198.

Conversation Starters: _____ and _____

FRIDAY February 5

First Progress Report due by 10:00 a.m. in my office – SAC 430.

4. Theology and "Global Culture": Implications for Religious Identity

MON February 8

Read: Schreiter pp. ix-45.

Conversation Starters: _____ and _____

WED February 10

Read: Schreiter pp. 46-83.

Conversation Starters: _____ and _____

MON February 15

Read: Schreiter pp. 84-133.

Conversation Starters: _____ and _____

5. "Translatability" and the Development of a Pluralistic Tradition

WED February 17

Read: Sanneh pp. 1-49.

Conversation Starters: _____ and _____

MON February 22

Read: Sanneh pp. 50-129.

Conversation Starters: _____ and _____

WED February 24

Read: Sanneh pp. 157-210.

Conversation Starters: _____ and _____

6. "Vodou" and "Catholicism" in Haiti

MON March 1

Read: Desmangles pp. xi-59.

Conversation Starters: _____ and _____

WED March 3

Field trip to the exhibit, *Domino/Dominó* by Bibiana Suárez. We leave from SAC 430 at 2:30 and return to campus by 5:00. The exhibit is at the Illinois Art Galery, James R. Thompson Center, 100 W. Randolph, Suite 2-100.

FRIDAY March 5

Second Progress Report due by 10:00 a.m. in my office – SAC 430.

MON March 8

Read: Desmangles pp. 60-130.

Conversation Starters: _____ and _____

WED March 10

Read: Desmangles pp. 131-181.

Conversation Starters: _____ and _____

FRIDAY March 19

Paper due by 10:00 a.m. in my office – SAC 430.