

Syllabus

# REL 117 Major Asian Religions



MWF 9:00-9:50

GOOD 105

Prof. Timothy Dobe

Steiner 105  
Office Hours: T/R 9:30-11:30  
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### **Course Description**

The Asian religions examined in this course (i.e., the Hindu, Buddhist, Confucian, Taoist and Shinto traditions) have shaped and been shaped by cultures that are hundreds?even thousands?of years old. The regions they cover span the vast distances between modern day Afghanistan, Pakistan and India in the ?west? and China and Japan in the ?east.? This course offers a basic introduction to the beliefs and practices of each tradition and emphasizes the interactions, blendings, co-existence and competition of Asian religions as they occur in these dynamic contexts. Students will encounter the religious claims, experiences and rituals of individual practitioners of Asian religions within complex historical situations of power and change.

### **Course Goals**

In this course students will be enabled and expected to:

Establish a basic mastery of central terms, mythologies and practices of each tradition.

Situate religious traditions within history and culture, including the material, political and gendered contexts in which these religions function.

Trace the development of Buddhism from its beginnings in South Asia through its continuities and transformations in China and Japan and articulate its relationships with other religious traditions.

Interpret the meaning of religious traditions in the lives of individual practitioners.

Critically reflect on the meanings, methods and categories of religious studies as an academic discipline.

### **Office Hours**

Tuesday & Thursday, 9:30-11:30. If you would like to meet with me during office hours, please sign up on the weekly schedule, which will be posted on my office door. If you have a regular scheduling conflict with my office hours, please let me know within the first two weeks of class.

### **Required Texts**

*Religions of Asia*, John Fenton  
*Bhagavad Gita*, Barbara Miller, tr.  
*Saints, Storytellers and Scoundrels*, Kirin Narayan  
*The Journey of One Buddhist Nun*, Sid Brown  
*Confucius: The Sacred as Secular*, Herbert Fingarette  
*Seven Taoist Masters*, Eva Wong, tr.

*All required texts are available for purchase at the Grinnell College bookstore. All other readings can be found under the appropriate folder (arranged by week following the Syllabus) within ?Course Materials? on the class Blackboard (Pioneerweb); on the syllabus these readings are marked with a (B). Please bring both books and Blackboard texts (printed out) to class.*

### **Course Requirements and Grading**

The following four elements will comprise your final grade for the course. Please let me know within the first full week of classes if, for any reason, you believe that special considerations need to be taken into account in evaluating your performance this semester (e.g., a learning disability). I would be glad to talk with you about this.

#### ***1) Attendance and Participation (15%)***

An attendance sheet will be passed around at the **beginning** of each class; it is students' responsibility to be sure to **sign this sheet every**

**class.** Since late arrivals and early departures disrupt class, I will count two tardies, two early departures, or any combination of the two as an absence. More than two unexcused absences during the course of the semester will have a significant, adverse effect on your final grade. For an absence to be ?excused? requires: an e-mail from you **before** the class meets alerting me of your coming absence and the reason for it, and documentation from a relevant source (Health or Student Services, etc.).

In addition to the basic attendance requirements, students are expected to come to class ready to ask informed questions and to be *respectful of* and *attentive to* each other, the professor, and class guests. Coming with the texts assigned for that day on the syllabus (including print-outs of reading from Blackboard) is also a part of basic class preparation. Students should be aware of the possibility of pop quizzes on Mondays and Wednesdays.

## ***2) Small Group and Seminar Participation (15%)***

Students will have the opportunity to participate actively in regular class discussions and group work, but especially in weekly small group and seminar meetings. Since our class size is rather large, these forums for discussion have been designed in order to increase students' ability to actively join in discussion. Thus the class will be divided into two seminar groups (A and B), each of which will (beginning during Week 2) usually meet for one hour on alternate Fridays (see schedule for variations). If these discussions are to be successful, students will need to have carefully read the assigned texts and *to bring the texts (including those posted on Blackboard) to seminar with them.* Students are required to make a one-page posting to the class Discussion Board by 6 p.m. Thursday night in preparation for the seminar.

On those weeks that Group A is in seminar, those in Group B will be in ?Small Group? discussion meetings; that is, they will be meeting in their assigned groups of about five students at a regular location of their own choosing (the Forum, etc.) at 9 a.m. When B is in seminar, those in Group A will be in their small groups. The leadership of small group discussions will rotate among the members of the group. It is your responsibility to ensure that you lead the group at least once (and that a Group Schedule is handed to the Professor by Wednesday of Week 2). Small group leaders are required to construct an **agenda of questions** for the group before class and to post that agenda to the Discussion Board on Pioneerweb **by 6 p.m. Thursday night. Small group leaders are**

**further required to submit a 2-page discussion reflection paper, along with a copy of their agenda and a record of attendance, in class on Monday.**

Your Small Group and Seminar Participation Grade (15%) will be based on your agenda/short reflection papers as small group leaders, the consistency and quality of your bi-monthly seminar posts, and your active contribution to seminar discussions.

**3) *One Short (2-3 page) Paper (10%)***

Students will write a 2-3 page paper, due Monday, Week 14 (10%).

**4) *Written Exams (60%)***

Students will take one in-class exam on 3/1 (15%).

Students will write a take-home exam that will be due on 4/26 in class (20%).

Students will take an in-class final exam, which, while focusing mainly on material covered after the mid-term break, **will include material from the entire semester** (25 %).

**Note on Handing in Assignments**

All assignments must be turned in in hard copy form either in class or to my mailbox in Steiner. No e-mail copies will be accepted in place of a hard copy.

**Academic Honesty**

For a helpful discussion of and practical guidelines for following Grinnell's Academic Honesty policies see:  
<http://web.grinnell.edu/WritingLab/CitationGuides/achondiscuss.html>

*Class and Reading Schedule*

**Week One**

1/23 Introduction

1/25 More Introduction  
(seminar and small groups assigned)

1/27

Read Fenton, "Introduction?"

Read Nye, Chapter 5 "Belief?" and Chapter 6 "Ritual?" (B)

## **Week Two**

*Doing Hinduism*

1/30 Is Hinduism a Religion?

Read Fenton, Chapter 1

Purusha Sukta (Rig Veda X.90) (B)

2/1 Sacrifice at the Center of the World

Read Fenton, Chapter 2

Film: "Altar of Fire?"

2/3

Read Graham, "Scripture as Spoken Word?" (B)

Group A seminar, Group B in small groups

## **Week Three**

*The Ins and Outs of Hinduism*

2/6 From Veda to Vedanta

Read Fenton, Chapter 3

Read Chapter 6, Chandogya Upanisad (B)

2/8 Loving the Gods

Read Fenton, Chapter 4, through pp. 66-68 (stop at "The Shaktas?")

Film: "Puja?"

2/10 Different Paths

Read Diana Eck, *Darśan* (B)

Group B seminar, Group A in small groups

*Recommended Website*

<http://www.netguruindia.com/puja2001/eanjali.html>

## **Week Four**

*Krishna: The Naughty, Philosopher-God*

**2/13** The Gods? Descents in a Hindu World

Read Fenton, Chapter 4, pp. 68-80 (from ?The Shaktas?)

*Recommended Website*

[http://www.gothamcomics.com/spiderman\\_india/](http://www.gothamcomics.com/spiderman_india/)

**2/15** The Gopis and the Circle Dance

Read Dimmitt, ?Kṛṣṇa? (B)

Read Haberman, *Journey Through the Twelve Forests* (B)

*Recommended Website*

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4980938>

Listen to the story (9 minutes) and/or watch the slideshow (about 8 minutes)

**2/17** Krishna Grows Up

Read *Bhagavad Gita*

Group A seminar, Group B in small groups

*Recommended Weblink*

To hear a few key verses of the Gītā recited in Sanskrit go to:

<http://www.malkan.com/webgita/index.shtml>

(note: you may need to download Shockwave in order to listen and view.)

## **Week Five**

*Gurus and Monks*

**2/20** Renouncing the World

Re-read Fenton, pp. 60-65 (starting at ?Vedanta?)

**2/22** Film: ?The Fourth Stage?

**2/24** Read Narayan, *Storytellers, Saints and Scoundrels*, Part I

Group B seminar, Group A in small groups

## **Week Six**

*A World of Stories*

2/27 So, what is Hinduism?

3/1 Quiz #1

3/3

Read Narayan, *Storytellers, Saints and Scoundrels*, Part II (pp. 113-228)

Group A seminar, Group B in small groups

**Week Seven**

*Buddha In and Against the Vedic World*

3/6 The Buddha's Story and his World

Read Fenton, Chapter 7

Read Strong "The Great Departure and Enlightenment?"  
and "The Death ?of the Buddha?(B)

3/8 The Buddha's Teaching and Legacy

Read Jonathan S. Walters, "Gotami's Story" (B)

3/10

Read Brown, *The Journey of One Buddhist Nun*, pp. 1-75

Group B seminar, Group A small groups

**Week Eight**

*Varieties of Buddhism*

3/13 Buddhism in Threes

Read Strong, pp. 23-33 (B)

Read "Agganna Sutta" (B)

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5163809>

Tibet

3/15 Mahayana Buddhism

Read Fenton, Chapter 8

Read Strong, "The Bodhisattva Path" (B)

Read Beastie Boys lyrics, "Bodhisattva Vow" (B)



**3/17**

Read Brown, *The Journey of One Buddhist Nun*, pp. 76-142  
Group A seminar, Group B in small groups

**Second semester recess**

March 17 (Friday 5 pm) -April 3 (Monday 8 am)

**Week Nine**

*The Chinese World*

**4/3 Confucius and his World**

Read Fenton, Chapter 10, "Roots of Religion in China," up to p. 172 (stop at "Lao zi")  
Film: "The Confucian Tradition"

**4/5 Li**

Read Neshar, "Shrines to Local Former Worthies" (B)  
Read *The Analects*, selections (B)

**4/7**

Read Fingarette, *Confucius: The Sacred as Secular*  
Group B seminar, Group A in small groups

**Week Ten**

*The Dao of the Dao*

**4/10 Philosophical Daoism**

Read Fenton, pp. 172 -175 (start with "Lao-zi")  
Read *Dao De Jing* and *Xuang zi* selections (B)

**4/13 Religious Daoism**

Read Fenton, Chapter 11, through p. 180 (stop at "The Buddhist Contribution")  
Read "Lao-zi" (B)  
Film: "Taoism? A Question of Balance?"

**4/15**

Read Wong, tr., *Seven Taoist Masters*  
Group A seminar, Group B in small groups

## **Week Eleven**

*The Chinese (Laughing) Buddha*

**4/17** Reimagining Buddhism in China  
Re-read Fenton, pp. 114-118  
Read Fenton, Chapter 9

**4/19** Engaging Samsara  
Read Fenton, p. 180 "The Buddhist Contribution" to end of  
Chapter 11  
Read Strong, "Women and the Sangha: Two Cases from  
China" (B)

*Recommended Website*

<http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/ttp/ttpbooks.html>

Roll through a virtual "Diamond Sutra" the world's oldest  
printed book

## **Take-home Exam Distributed**

**4/21** Buddhist Defense, Buddhist Offense  
Read "In Defense of Buddhism: *The Disposition of Error*" at  
<http://acc6.its.brooklyn.cuny.edu/~phalsall/texts/dispos.html>  
Read "Laughing at the Tao" (B)  
Group B seminar, Group A in small groups

## **Week 12**

*Japan*

**4/24** Shinto  
Read Fenton, Chapter 13  
Film: "Spirits of the State: Japan's Yasukuni Shrine"

**4/26** Zen (or Killing the Buddha)  
Read D. T. Suzuki, "What is Zen?" and "Satori: Or Acquiring a  
New  
Viewpoint" (B)

## **Take-home Exam Due**

4/28

Read Reader and Tanabe, "The Providers of Benefits: Gods, Saints, and Wizards" (B)

Group A seminar, Group B in small groups (final meetings)

## **Week 13**

*The Experience of Asian Religions in America*

5/1 The World's Parliament of Religions

Read Fenton, Chapter 5

5/3 A Mini-Parliament of Religions

Read Carrette and King, Chapter 3, *Selling Spirituality* (B)

5/5 Zen and Pure Land

Note: No small groups or seminars

Read Sallie B. King, "Awakening Stories of Zen Buddhist Women" (B)

Read Stevenson, "Death Bed Testimonials of the Pure Land Faithful" (B)

## **Week 14**

*The Experience of Asian Religions in America*

5/8

Read Fenton on Buddhism and the West pp. 152-157 and on Japan pp. 212-216

Read "Meditate on It" (B)

Read Strong, pp. 343-349 (B)

## **Short Paper Due**

5/10

Read Carrette and King, "Conclusion," *Selling Spirituality* (B)

Film: "Doing Time, Doing Vipassana"

**Night Meeting: Exam Review, 7 p.m. (location TBA)**

**5/12**

Final Class