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# Religions of the Americas II

**Instructor**

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**Institution**

Wilfrid Laurier University  
 Provincial University; enrolment: 6000 undergraduates, 1000 graduates

## Course Description

An introduction to religious studies using selected examples of religion in North America. Major topics include inter-religious relations, the westernizing of Asian religions, the changing nature of religious tradition, and religions in multicultural settings. The course concentrates on Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam as they are found in North America.

## Course Objectives

1. To familiarize students with the vocabulary and concepts necessary for doing advanced work in religious studies.
2. To examine inter-religious and inter-cultural encounters and explore processes of change, adaptation, enculturation, and conversion; to explore the relationship between religion and social, cultural, national identities.
3. To explore selected examples of Asian and Middle Eastern religions as found in North America; to provide students with background to aid inter-cultural, inter-religious discourse.

## Required Texts

1. William A. Young, The World's Religions. 1995. Introductory textbook on world religions.
2. Pema Chödrön. The Wisdom of No Escape. 1991. An example of a religious text aimed at a North American audience.
3. Course anthology.

## Requirements

1. Three short papers on each of the case studies, 2@10%, 1@20% = 40%

Assignments will be based on critical readings of assigned material.

2. Three quizzes. 10% each = 30%

Essay and other questions. Assigned readings and dates for quizzes to be announced in advance.

3. Class participation.

Come to class ready to discuss the material. Ensure that you have completed all the assigned readings. While there is no assigned mark for class participation, keep in mind that what you get out of this class is related to what you put into it. Active participation in class, whether through questions, comments, or discussion point, helps you better process the material.

#### 4. Final exam = 30%

Formal exam, scheduled during the examination period. Class lectures, readings, films, guest speaks, etc. are all fair game for the final examination.

### **Tentative Course Outline**

The course will begin with a brief overview of religions in contemporary, pluralist North America. We will begin with a consideration of the question, "What is religion?" in personal, social, cultural and intercultural terms. Then we will examine Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam as religious traditions in North America. For each of these traditions we will consider the following:

- overview of the tradition, its history
- history of tradition in North America
- examples of the religion in North America
- impulse from cultural source
- impulse from adaptation and adoption in North America

There will be a quiz on each of these religious traditions, based on assigned readings describing and explaining the history of that tradition. For each religious tradition you will also write a short paper, based on readings from the course anthology and textbooks.

#### **Week 1** Review of what is religion?

Readings: Young: Introduction, Chapt. 1, 2.

#### **Week 2** Community and religion, change, adaptation, conversion.

Readings: Young: Chapt. 14, 15; Anthology: Robert Ellwood. Eastern Spirituality in America.

#### **Weeks 3-5** Hinduism in North America

- History of Hinduism in North America
- Transcendentalists, Theosophy, Spiritualists, yoga and New Age
- Hindu temples in North America, lay-out, practices compared with temple complexes in India
- Possible field trip to Hindu temple
- Western converts to Hinduism

Readings: Young: Chapt. 5 (look at Chapt. 7 also); section in anthology on Hinduism: Ellwood, Colonel Olcott and Madame Blavatsky, Journey to the East, from Alternate Altars; Narayanan, Creating the South Indian "Hindu" Experience in the United States, from A

### **RE101**

Sacred Thread; Gelberg, Exploring an Alternative Reality: Spiritual Life in ISKON, from Krishna Consciousness in the West.

## Weeks 6-8 Buddhism in North America

- History of Buddhism in North America
- Catalogue of Buddhist centres in North America
- Examination of training offered in North American Zen
- Tibetan Buddhism in North America, change and adaptation

Readings: Young: Chapt. 6, 9 (skim Chapt. 8); Section in anthology on Buddhism: Prebish, Buddhist Beginnings in America: 1893-1960; The Consciousness Explosion: 1961-1970; In the Aftermath of Chaos: 1971-, from American Buddhism; Tworkov, Zen in the Balance: Can It Survive America? Hori, Sweet and Sour Zen; Ellwood and Partin, Tibetan Buddhism in America, from Religious and Spiritual Groups in Modern America; Chödrön, The Wisdom of No Escape.


## Weeks 9-11 Islam in North America

- History of Islam in North America
- Western attitudes towards Islam
- Questions of otherness
- Western converts to Islam, Black Muslim movement

Readings: Young: Chapt. 11; Section from anthology on Islam: Bilgé, Islam in the Americas, from Encyclopedia of Religion; Haddad, The Challenge of Muslim Minorityness: The American Experience, from The Integration of Islam and Hinduism in Western Europe; Hermansen, Two-Way Acculturation: Muslim Women in America, Between Individual Choice (Liminality) and Community (Communitas), from The Muslims of America; Voll, Islamic Issues for Muslims in the United States, from The Muslims of America.

## Week 12 Concluding Remarks

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