

Religions of the World: East

Dr. Charles Ess

PHIL/RELG 201.B -- 3 credit hours Burnham 215

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<http://www.drury.edu/faculty/ess/eastern/relg201.html>

Required Texts

Ellen M. Chen. *The Tao Te Ching: A New Translation with Commentary*.

John Y. Fenton, et al, *Religions of Asia*, 3rd edition

Swami Prabhavananda and Christopher Isherwood, trans., *The Song of God: Bhagavad-Gita*

Shunryu Suzuki. *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*.

Yoga : Discipline of Freedom : The Yoga Sutra Attributed to Patanjali, Barbara Stoler Miller, Trans.

Optional Text:

Self-Knowledge : Sankara's "Atmabodha," by Swami Nikhilananda (Translator)

Additional Resources

"Western - Eastern: An Initial List," (Web document)

Motet - Web-based conferencing software: you will need both a Drury e-mail account and a Motet user ID and password (supplied by the instructor)

Peterson et al., "Religious Pluralism: How Can We Understand Religious Diversity?" (reserve)

Additional readings, resources to be announced

Course Project:

In this class we will explore in an introductory way some of the main ideas, beliefs, practices, and historical developments of eastern religions/philosophies -- various traditions called "Hinduism," (better: the San_tana Dharma, the Eternal Religion), Jainism, various forms of Buddhism, Taoism, and Japanese traditions (Buddhisms, Shinto).

To do so, we will

I. use a theoretical framework which will tie together

- the history of specific cultures and the religious traditions which emerge within those cultures
- the role of economic organization, as correlated with social arrangements, as the environment within which religious traditions emerge and develop
- the roles and images of women and men in the emergence and development of religious traditions.

In doing so, you will not only learn something about the particular beliefs and practices of given religious/philosophical traditions - you will also come to see a much larger picture concerning "religion" as a social force and source of individual and collective beliefs, one which both shapes and is shaped by the larger cultural environment.

II. We will further explore two additional, interrelated issues:

- We will address the question of religious pluralism. This question is raised both within the context of the Eastern traditions we will study: Eastern traditions are often far more tolerant of "other" belief systems than many Western counterparts, and we will seek to discover why this is so. But this contrast, in turn, raises the question of religious pluralism between or among Eastern and Western traditions.
- We will likewise explore additional underlying similarities and differences between Eastern and Western views (beginning with the Web resource "eastwest.html")

Why do this? I can think of at least two reasons which derive from the Western liberal arts tradition in general and the mission statement of Drury University in particular - specifically the phrase, "to liberate persons to *participate* responsibly in the global community."

1. "Participating responsibly in the global community" should include communicating with "Others": communication typically requires both tolerance and understanding of others' beliefs. Accordingly, a central goal of this course is to learn tolerance and thereby how to communicate more effectively with "Others."

In exploring Eastern views, I hope you get past an initial phase of culture shock, in which the strangeness of these views will tempt you to reject them as inferior, silly, stupid, wrong, etc. Rather, I hope that you will come to see that Eastern views represent views of the world which are at least as adequate in many ways as Western views. Accordingly, the people who hold these beliefs are not inferior, silly, stupid, wrong, etc.

Learning tolerance of diverse opinions is generally useful, especially as you pursue a liberal arts education -- which can be roughly defined as discovery of diverse modes of inquiry, diverse points of view, and how to fit these different understandings into a larger, holistic overview of human existence and human choices.

In addition, your gaining insight and tolerance regarding Eastern viewpoints should serve you well in a rapidly shrinking "global village" in which Eastern cultures play increasingly significant economic and political roles. If you understand something of what others believe, and acknowledge that others' beliefs have an important legitimacy and integrity (i.e., they are not inferior, silly, stupid, wrong, etc.) - you will be much better prepared to communicate with others, and thereby participate more effectively in a global community.

Note: this is not just academic theory - former students have confirmed with me over the years how valuable this course has been in preparing them for better understanding and interacting with "Others" from throughout the world.

2. How do we become "liberated"?

Our approach to the religions/philosophies of Eastern traditions will include a focus on philosophical beliefs and claims. This is required in part because, somewhat in contrast with Western religious traditions, what Westerners usually associate with "philosophy" (rational argument, critical examination of fundamental claims, etc.) centrally interweave Eastern religions/philosophies. (Moreover, you will see that many of these traditions likewise believe in "liberation" - but it will be a question in the course to determine how far "liberation" in these traditions means something similar to the meanings of "liberation" in Western traditions.)

But this philosophical approach is not only suited to our subject matter: as a central discipline in the liberal arts education (of which this course is a part), *philosophy* is concerned in good measure precisely with the liberation spoken of in the Mission Statement.

One key aspect of liberation via philosophy is *the effort to become aware of one's beliefs and assumptions about oneself and the world.*

In particular, in philosophy one attempts to discover especially those assumptions and beliefs which are questionable - because they lack further evidence or support. This means that one has to learn how to stand "outside of" one's own beliefs - a very hard trick indeed. One way of learning to stand outside our own beliefs is *to explore the views and beliefs of another, very different culture* - i.e., a culture with beliefs quite different from our own: because the assumptions and beliefs in this alternative culture are so different, in becoming aware of such views, we become aware of how *questionable* many of our own ideas and concepts may be. In particular, many of our uniquely Western ideas appear questionable or strange when viewed from the perspective of eastern religions.

. In part, then, we will thus be using eastern perspectives as a tool or means for doing philosophy - i.e., for becoming critically aware of our own assumptions and beliefs. Ideally, this will liberate us from ignorance of others and dependency on others for what we believe: ideally, it will liberate us to develop our own views and beliefs based on what we learn and think on our own.

Finally, Eastern systems not only illumine our own for us because they are so different: in some ways, at least, Eastern conceptions can complement or even replace some of our own assumptions. I suspect you may find in Eastern thought some concepts and ideas which ultimately "make more sense" to you than some Western assumptions which you currently hold to. In this way, I hope this class will contribute to your putting together your own view of things: this is what I understand liberal arts education to be directed towards.

Class requirements:

1. Attendance: Eastern thought is oftentimes so very different from Western thought that it is opaque to Westerners who are first dealing with it. Hard experience suggests that most of the time, you will be able to clarify those points which are unclear to you only if you come to class.

Accordingly, regular attendance is required. **Every absence - for whatever reason - will result in the deduction of 1 percentage point from your final grade.**

You can make up the work for a missed class in one of several ways: a writing exercise on the day's topics, a contribution to the class Web site, a report on an extra-curricular activity which helps us better understand Eastern traditions, or some alternative work which you and I will agree upon.

In my view, this class is (part of) your job. Employers do not pay employees for not showing up.

2. Writing assignments/in-class exams. We will have several major writing assignments and one or two

exams. In addition, there will be short informal writing assignments - some of which may be posted on the Web site - in response to assigned readings. You may also choose to take an exam in place of the final writing assignment.

The writing assignments and exams will constitute approximately 80% of your grade. They will be "weighted" -- that is, early work will count for a smaller percentage of your grade than later work.

The writing assignments and exams are intended to both check your comprehension of class material and to encourage the development of your own thinking. To help you get ready for the in-class exam, I will provide you with a study guide and review the study questions with you in class.

Writing assignments will be graded in light of content and minimal requirements for formal writing. These include: correct spelling and sentence structure; correct documentation of sources; good paragraph/paper organization. Excessive problems with formal writing requirements will result in the assignment being returned for rewriting before it is graded. To get a better idea of what I look for in writing, see the "Checklist for Assessing Student Writing," below,, and the "Abbreviations used in writing assignment grading," below.

If you are not satisfied with a grade on either a major writing assignment or exam, please discuss it with me. On at least the first writing assignment, you are welcome to improve your grade by rewriting. Rewrites of writing assignments must be turned in within ONE WEEK of the date the original assignment was returned to you. Make-ups of the shorter writing assignments will be allowed only under exceptional circumstances.

PLAGIARISM: Plagiarism is defined in one source as "the presentation of someone else's ideas or words as your own." Examples of plagiarism include:

copying more than three words from someone else's writing and presenting it as your own;

summarizing or paraphrasing another person's idea/s -- but without acknowledging that person as the source of the idea/s

While you may not intend to plagiarize, you do so when you neglect to use quote marks and/or to document the original sources of idea/s you have summarized or paraphrased.

Plagiarism on a written assignment will result in an "F" for that assignment and require that you redo the assignment. Repeated instances of plagiarism will result in an "F" for the course and may be grounds for dismissal from Drury University. (See the college catalog, p. 60.)

To avoid plagiarism, pay careful attention to the requirements for documentation: these will be reviewed early on in the class.

3. Class participation. About 20% of your final grade will depend on class participation. Class participation includes asking questions, commenting on current topics, and becoming involved in discussion.

You will note that this means that good class participation can make the difference between a "C" and a "B" - or a "B" and an "A."

Class discussion and participation will be guided by the following groundrules:

1. Listen before we agree or disagree. Virtually every viewpoint deserves a hearing.

2. Welcome differences and use conflict. When others disagree with you, take the disagreement not as a personal attack on your views; rather, consider the probability that the other person's viewpoint arises from

experiences and thought which you have not had. Disagreement means first of all the opportunity to learn about experiences and thought different from your own. Learning about different experiences and thought often serves to help you understand your own experiences and views more clearly.

When disagreements arise, work through the following checklist:

- a. separate the view that is expressed from the person who is expressing it. Be clear that your disagreement is with a viewpoint - not with the person's identity.
- b. ask what evidence or arguments might support that position? People often believe what they believe for some good reason. What might these reasons be?
- c. take seriously the possibility that your view might be less correct than the one you disagree with. Is it possible that in fact there are better arguments and stronger evidence for the view you disagree with?
- d. think seriously about how your view and the other view might both be correct or compatible, rather than opposites or incompatible. Frequently we assume that a difference of views must mean that they necessarily exclude one another; but frequently, it turns out, different views may complete one another.

Only after you have gone through these four steps should you raise your objections or disagreements with the other position.

3. No put-downs of others will be tolerated.

Putting down another person because they disagree with you -- most frequently, by ridiculing them or the view they have expressed -- is a common way of seeking psychological satisfaction in the face of the threat they represent to your own viewpoint. To respond to disagreement with put-downs may save you the labor of thinking things through, and the pain of having to admit that you may be wrong -- but it also will guarantee your closed-mindedness and destroy any possibility of discussion. Silence and closed minds are not the point of liberal arts education.

4. Grades. I grade each assignment on a 100 point scale (90-100 = A; 80-89 = B; 70-79 = C; 60-69 = D; below 60 = F). Usually I assign a letter grade, e.g., B+ (= 87.5), C (= 75), A- (= 92.5), etc. In addition, each assignment is given a certain "weight" -- i.e., a percentage figure which reflects its importance in the course. For example, the first writing assignment may count as 5% of your total grade. Your grade on that assignment is then multiplied by the percentage figure, resulting in a certain number of points.

For example, if you get a "B" (= 85) on the first writing assignment, and if that assignment is worth 5%, the point total would be $(85 \times .05) = 4.25$. At the end of the semester, the point totals for all the assignments and your class participation grade are then added up to determine your final grade (less any deductions necessary because of excessive absences).

I keep a running record of your grades, and it is easy to calculate your current average. Please feel free to ask me about your current grade average at any point through the semester. As well, as a way of keeping you informed regarding your grade, I will pass out grade slips to you two or three times through the course of the semester. These, in addition to your midterm grades from the registrar's office, should give you a very accurate idea of your progress in the class.

For more information on grading, see the Departmental Policy, attached (and on the course Web site).

Course Outline

Introduction to Eastern Religions

On the nature of religion; the religions of Asia: Fenton, ch. 1

Informal writing assignment -- see below.

Religious story/Scripture as Myth

Early religions: economics, social structure, and the two "logics" of Myth

"Reversal myth"

Myths of creation, East and West: in-class discussion

Writing and Documentation Issues:

In-class exercise: MLA documentation style

First Writing Assignment: on definition(s) and frameworks for the study of religion from a cross-cultural perspective (due ca. Sept. 12)

Religious Traditions of India (Vedanta)

Background and development of Hinduism:

Readings:

Fenton, chs. 2-6;

Selections from the *Bhagavadgita*, the *Yoga Sutra*, and (optional) *Self-Knowledge*.

Second Writing Assignment: Vedanta, Yoga, and Religious Pluralism (due ca. Oct. 17)

Buddhism

Background and development of Buddhism

Readings:

Fenton, chs. 7-9

Zen Buddhism: *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*

Third Writing Assignment: Buddhism (due ca. Nov. 7)

Religions of China

Background and development of Confucianism, Taoism:

Readings:

Fenton, chs. 10, 11

Taoism: *Tao te Ching*

Fourth Writing Assignment/In-class exam: Chinese Religions (due ca. Nov. 24)

Religions of Japan

Geography, Prehistory, and Japanese Myth; Shinto; Religions in Modern Japan

Reading:

Fenton, ch. 13

Final Writing Assignment/In-class exam: due final period

Informal Writing Assignment: Fenton, ch. 1

Instructions:

Read Fenton, ch. 1, paying careful attention to the authors' definition of religion on pp. 4-16.

The definition offered by our authors stresses three points, i.e.:

- a) religion as a relationship between human beings and sacred realities;
- b) processes of symbolic transformation;
- c) cultural tradition and a system of symbols.

In a brief essay (3-4 pages):

1. Write an introductory paragraph in which you describe for your reader which of these points of the definition ["a)," "b)," or "c)"] you will discuss.
2. Out of your own religious experience or understanding, describe an example or two of what you think this part of the definition refers to. For example, you may think of the ritual of bar mitzvah or the sacrament of baptism as an example of "symbolic transformation." Describe your example with some care, and explain carefully how it fits the definition discussed in Fenton.
3. Paraphrase an example of the definition provided by Fenton in the pertinent portion of ch. 1.
4. Discuss briefly any points of agreement and difference you notice between your (Western) e