

Religious Studies 780

WORLD SPIRITUALITY

Autumn 2005: Tuesdays, 5:30 - 8:00 P.M.

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One sometimes hears it said that the religions of the world are like different paths up the same mountain or different colors of the spectrum, or like the various dialects of a single language.

At first glance this claim appears to be contradicted by the often widely divergent formulations of doctrine that are to be found in the different traditions. What could be further apart, for example, than Hinduism, which includes many Gods; Islam, which insists on one God; and Theravada Buddhism, which believes in no God? There are nonetheless those who contend that behind such outward differences there exists an inward or esoteric core of common spiritual Truth, unanimously attested to by the sages and mystics of the several religions. This truth has been called the *sophia perennis* or “perennial wisdom”, and those who espouse and defend it are often referred to as perennialists or perennial philosophers.

The aim of this graduate seminar is to introduce students to the perennialist school of comparative religious thought. Readings have been chosen from perennialist authors representing a variety of religious traditions, and the aim is to exhibit their characteristic approach both to specific religions and to various methodological, philosophical, historical, and aesthetic issues important to the contemporary study of religion. The work of Frithjof Schuon, widely regarded as the leading exponent of the school, has been highlighted throughout the course.

Readings:

A single text is required: a reader of photocopied materials, with articles and chapters selected from a number of leading perennialist authors (see schedule below).

Method:

The course will be conducted as a Socratic discussion. The authors will be our teachers and the readings our lectures. Each class will begin with the posing of questions based upon the assignments for the day, and it is expected that students will join with the instructor in a shared conversational inquiry. The emphasis throughout the seminar will be on active engagement and conversation, not the passive taking of notes, a premium being placed on precision, explanation, and defense. Students will be held doubly accountable: for courteously listening to the contributions of others and for patiently justifying their own observations.

Requirements:

1. *Reading.* The assigned texts—to say the least of it—are exceptionally dense and demanding. In the time they might have spent preparing much longer assignments or doing extensive research in the library, students are expected to read the selections closely and carefully so as to be well-prepared for every class.

2. *Attendance*, both prompt and regular. Although attendance is not taken, the student who expects to do well without coming to class will be gravely disappointed. And attendance means punctuality; tardy arrivals and seminars are a disastrous mix.

3. *Constructive participation*. For obvious reasons, this course is not for students who prefer an education they can simply ingest as the passive takers of notes. It is for those who enjoy the acts of thinking, reflection, and argument. Frequent contributions to class discussion are not merely desirable. They are essential. One-third of the final course grade will be based on class participation.

4. *Essays*. Students will write three essays, two of 6-8 pages each and a third of 10-15 pages. Neither book reports nor research papers, these essays should be viewed instead as continuing conversations in which their authors wrestle in writing with the ideas opened up by the assigned readings. The third essay should present a well-informed and carefully considered assessment of the perennialist perspective as a whole. The first essay is due by Monday, September 26; the second by Monday, October 31; and the third by Monday, December 5. (Earlier submissions will be gratefully accepted.) Professor Cutsinger's *Breviary of English Usage*, which can be found on his website under "Teaching", will be used in his grading and commentary. Grades received on the better of the two shorter essays and on the third essay will be used in calculating the final course grade (one-third each).

Schedule

August 23 The Study of Religions

Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "The *Philosophia Perennis* and the Study of Religion"
Huston Smith, "Is There a Perennial Philosophy?"
Frithjof Schuon, "The Sense of the Absolute in Religions"

August 30 Hinduism

Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, "The Vedânta and Western Tradition"
Frithjof Schuon, "The Vedânta"

September 6 Orthodoxy and Tradition

Whitall N. Perry, "Revelation-Authority-Infallibility"
Philip Sherrard, "The Meaning and Necessity of Sacred Tradition"
Frithjof Schuon, "Naïveté"

September 13 Metaphysics and Epistemology

René Guénon, "Oriental Metaphysics"
James S. Cutsinger, "A Knowledge That Wounds Our Nature"
Frithjof Schuon, "Axioms of the *Sophia Perennis*"

September 20 Buddhism

Marco Pallis, “Is There Room for Grace in Buddhism?”
Frithjof Schuon, “Mystery of the Bodhisattva”

September 27 Religion and Science

René Guénon, “Sacred and Profane Science”
Seyyed Hossein Nasr, “The Cosmos as Theophany”
Frithjof Schuon, “The Veil of Isis”

October 4 Open Discussion

October 11 The Exoteric and the Esoteric

Kenneth Oldmeadow, “The Transcendent Unity of Religions”
Whitall N. Perry, “Mysterium Magnum”
Frithjof Schuon, “The Ambiguity of Exoterism”, “Two Esoterisms”

October 18 Christianity

Philip Sherrard, “Christianity and Other Sacred Traditions”
James S. Cutsinger, “*Hesychia*: An Orthodox Opening to Esoteric Ecumenism”
Frithjof Schuon, “Some Observations”, “The Cross”

October 25 Art and Symbolism

Titus Burckhardt, “The Genesis of the Hindu Temple”
Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, “The Christian and Oriental, or True, Philosophy of Art”
Frithjof Schuon, “Foundations of an Integral Aesthetics”

November 1 Spirituality

Marco Pallis, “On Soliciting and Imparting Spiritual Counsel”
Whitall N. Perry, “Orthodoxy-Ritual-Method”
Frithjof Schuon, “The Nature and Function of the Spiritual Master”

November 8 Islam

Martin Lings, “The Doctrine”, “The Method”
Frithjof Schuon, “The Quran”

November 15 Eschatology

René Guénon, “The Dark Age”

Gai Eaton, "What We Are and Where We Are"
Frithjof Schuon, "Universal Eschatology"

November 22 No Class (Thanksgiving)

November 29 Open Discussion and Conclusion

Office Hours

Tuesday and Thursday, 9:30 - 10:30 or by appointment.