

RELIGION 100 — INTRODUCTION TO RELIGION

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I. Course Description

Religion 100 is an exploration of diverse ways of being religious in thought, action, community, and experience, as displayed in two or three traditions and cultures.

This course will introduce you to three major religions of the world (if you wish to study several world religions, you should take Rel 150). In this class, we will investigate the religions and selected sacred texts of Judaism, Christianity, and Hinduism. All three sections of the course are structured the same way. We will begin by examining the religion's basic history and beliefs. In class discussions, we will only be able to cover selected major subjects and events; you will glean other aspects from your readings of Michael Molloy's *Experiencing the World's Religions*. Then we will examine some sacred texts from the tradition, because few if any religions can be understood without an encounter with some of their sacred texts (such "texts" can be either oral or written). Finally, we will examine an ethical topic and major thinker important in the history of the religious tradition (i.e., how to be religious in "action"). In particular, we will discuss how three historically-significant figures from the 20th century—one from each tradition—responded to the existence of evil within society: (a) for Judaism, Elie Wiesel and his book, *Night*; (b) for Christianity, Martin Luther King, Jr. and the book, *I Have a Dream: Writings and Speeches that Changed the World*; (c) for Hinduism, Mohandas Gandhi and the book, *The Way to God*. For more information about these texts, see "Required Texts" below.

In order to allow you to explore one of these three religions more deeply, you will choose one of the three world religions we study and will write a paper on some aspect of that religious tradition. After completing the paper, you will then work with a group of students who also wrote papers about that religion in order to create a web page about that tradition.

We thus have a number of interesting topics to investigate and discuss, and you will have some freedom to choose a topic within one religion that you will study in depth. Although we will try to follow the schedule (see below), this syllabus and course are not set in stone. As we progress through the semester, I encourage you to give me your feedback about the course (as I will do for you), and the class can negotiate possible adjustments to improve the course as we go along.

This syllabus, the assignment schedule, and other course materials will be posted on this class's Learn Link conference. Please notify me immediately if it is not on your Learn Link Desktop.

II. Required Texts

Experiencing the World's Religions, by Michael Molloy. Second edition. This text also comes with a CD-ROM study guide that will reinforce and enhance what you will read in the assigned chapters.

Working through the CD-ROM materials will be an excellent way to ensure that you have learned the important material in each chapter we cover.

Night, by Elie Wiesel. This text, which relates Wiesel's experiences as a young boy at both Auschwitz and Buchenwald, will serve as the primary text for our discussions of the Holocaust and ethical responses to such an evil.

I Have a Dream: Writings and Speeches that Changed the World, by Martin Luther King, Jr. This text, which includes Dr. King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail," "Pilgrimage to Nonviolence," "My Trip to the Land of Gandhi," and "I have a Dream" speech, will be the focus of our discussions about the Civil Rights movement, which we will examine within the context of Christianity, liberation movements within Christianity, and connections with the philosophy of Mohandas Gandhi.

The Bhagavad-Gita: Krishna's Counsel in Time of War, translated by Barbara Stoler Miller. "The Song of the Lord" consists of only 700 lines in the much longer Sanskrit war epic, the *Mahabharata*, but it is one of the world's great scriptures. This text portrays the warrior Arjuna's battlefield conversation with the divine Krishna (an incarnation of Vishnu) and includes much of the essence of Hindu philosophy and wisdom.

The Way to God, by Mohandas Gandhi. This text includes Gandhi's writings on the nature of God and spiritual practice. We also will examine his concept of *Satyagraha* ("Truth-force"; non-violent confrontation).

The Bible (Revised Standard Version): <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/rsv/browse.html>. Since you already have five texts to purchase, and the RSV Bible is on-line, I will **not** require that you purchase a copy of the Bible. You will, however, be reading significant sections of the Bible and talking about those texts in class. If you wish to purchase a Bible, the Oxford College bookstore has copies of the best academic translation available (NRSV).

Other on-line resources: I have begun to collect the links of Internet resources that will be of help to you as we study Judaism, Christianity, and Hinduism. The list can be found on the home page of the Oxford College Pierce Program in Religion (click on "Links to Online Religion Resources"):
<http://www.emory.edu/OXFORD/pierceprogram/Pierce.html>.

III. Goals of the Course

The course is structured in three major parts. There are specific goals for each section of the course (listed below), but the overarching goals are for you to increase your awareness of the important elements of three major religions, to recognize the similarities and differences among those three major religions, and to understand better their sacred texts and world views. Specifically,

Judaism: After completing the section on Judaism, you should be able to discuss major developments in the four general periods of Jewish history, describe the three parts of the Hebrew Bible, interpret selected texts from the Hebrew Bible, describe Jewish religious practices, explain the characteristics of the major divisions within Judaism, discuss the history of persecution that culminated in the Holocaust

(including the account in Elie Wiesel's *Night*), and discuss challenges that Judaism faces in the modern world.

Christianity: After completing the section on Christianity, you should be able to summarize the life and teachings of Jesus in the context of his times, describe the structure and basic content of the New Testament, interpret selected texts from the New Testament, explain basic Christian doctrines and practices, discuss the growth of Christianity, and discuss the Civil Rights movement as articulated by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (in selected chapters of *I Have a Dream*) in the context of Christian belief.

Hinduism: After completing the section on Hinduism, you should be able to describe the origins of Hinduism; discuss concepts of karma, rebirth, and liberation; discuss aspects of social life, such as caste and stages of life; explain the practices and goals of the four religious paths; describe features of devotional Hinduism practiced by the majority of Hindus; and recall the names and characteristics of Hinduism's most popular gods.

Paper and Web Page Construction: After completing the paper and web page, you should be able to discuss the significance of the topic you investigated within the context of the religion, describe your contributions to your group's web page on that religion, and be able to create a web page on Learn Link.

IV. Course Requirements

- A. ***Tests*** (300 points): There will be three major tests during the semester (tentatively: February 19, March 28, and April 25). Each test will be non-cumulative and will cover all our activities during that time period (e.g., lectures, readings, study guides, and other activities). Tests will contain both objective and essay questions. Make-up tests will only be given for excused absences, and you should notify me *in advance*.
- B. ***Final Examination*** (100 points): The cumulative, take-home final exam is due on Learn Link by the end of the time set for this class's final exam.
- C. ***Site Visit Reports and Evaluations*** (75 points): One of the overarching goals of this course is for you to cultivate an understanding and appreciation of traditions that are different from your own. One of the best ways in which to accomplish this goal is to experience worship experiences or services of other religious traditions. You will be required to attend two such services, write a short paper about your experiences, read and evaluate another class member's experiences on a site visit, and then discuss your experiences together with that class member. For your site visit, please select sites that will introduce you to traditions unfamiliar to you (e.g., if you are most familiar with the Christian tradition, you should visit a Jewish Synagogue and a Hindu Temple; if you wish to visit a site from another religious tradition, please speak with me in advance). Details of possible religious sites to visit, as well as guidelines for your visit, report, and evaluation, will all be posted on Learn Link. I also will place a "Site Visit Rides" conference on LearnLink that will allow class members to find and share rides more easily. It is helpful to go on a site visit with a friend who is a member of that religious tradition. If you would prefer to go with a group of people, we can arrange that as well.

- D. **Academic Journal with Study/Reading Guides** (75 points): You will have a number of homework assignments in this class, and you should keep those completed assignments in a separate place in a notebook. Many of those assignments will consist of study/reading guides, because an essential element of studying religions such as Judaism, Christianity, and Hinduism is to read their sacred texts carefully. We will read selected sacred texts, and I will often ask you to complete study/reading guides before coming to class. This will enhance our class discussions of these texts. Sometimes I will also ask you to post these assignments on Learn Link before we meet to discuss that study/reading guide.
- E. **Paper and Web Page** (50 points): You will write a paper on an aspect of one of the three religious traditions we study and then work collaboratively with a group in order to create web pages about that tradition. Although you will be working in a group on this project, I will assess your individual contribution to the project.
- F. **Lectures on Christianity and Art:** The Pierce Program in Religion is sponsoring two programs that are intimately connected to our class, so class members are expected to attend: (1) “Pontormo’s *Visitation* in SS. Annunziata, Florence: A Visual Interpretation of Luke 1:39-56,” a lecture by Dr. Heidi Hornik and Dr. Mikeal Parsons of Baylor University, February 11. Tarbuton Hall at 7:30 p.m. and (2) “A Visual Interpretation of Early Christianity,” a lecture by Dr. Graydon Snyder, Professor of New Testament (retired) at Chicago Theological Seminary. March 25. Tarbuton Hall at 7:30 p.m.
- G. **Class Attendance and Participation:** Class attendance and participation are essential to the learning process and to your grade. You are expected to attend each class session, to be **on time**, and to be prepared to interact with the subject matter and your fellow classmates. You will be allowed two absences without academic penalty. If you have more than two absences, eight points will be subtracted from your point total *for each absence*.

Your grades will be assigned as follows: 540+ total points = A, 480-539 = B; 420-479 = C; 360-419 = D; below 360 = F. “Borderline” grades will be determined on the basis of class attendance and participation (including study guides, etc.).

V. Appointments

My office hours are M/W 2:00 – 3:00 p.m. and T/Th 2:30 – 3:30 p.m. If you cannot meet with me during the posted hours, please see me after class, and we will arrange a mutually convenient time. Don’t forget, I am (almost!) always available via e-mail and Learn Link.

VI. Course Philosophy

This course is intended for anyone who is interested in studying Judaism, Christianity, and Hinduism. No prior knowledge or commitment to any particular religious tradition is required or expected, nor is any particular religious stance encouraged (or discouraged), other than what is outlined below. Since

we will engage in the academic study of these religions, we all must be open to the contemporary methods of the scholarly study of these religions—their sacred texts, beliefs, history, and other contexts.

I simply ask you to approach this class with an open mind. No matter what your beliefs, religion, and/or philosophy, this openness must include a willingness to explore religions, beliefs, and understandings other than the ones with which you might be familiar. And all of us, no matter what our personal beliefs, must cultivate an appreciation of and respect for traditions, beliefs, and philosophies that are different from our own.

As is to be expected in a college classroom, all of us have divergent beliefs, and I expect you, like me, not to try to force your personal beliefs on others in this class. You will be encouraged to state your opinions and to dialogue with others, but everyone's views will be respected.

An essential part of that honesty is the ability to trust each other. All of us at Oxford College live by the standards set forth in the Honor Code (pages 49-51 in the Oxford College Catalog), which includes the "responsibility for maintaining standards of unimpeachable honesty in all academic work" (p. 49). The Honor Code also indicates that we cannot tolerate actions in others that violate this code, so I (and you) am obligated to report any violations. Oxford College takes this honor code very seriously, as do I, and penalties for violations are severe. Please read the Honor Code carefully; I will trust you to conduct yourselves accordingly.

VII. Course Schedule

Introduction to Religion:

January 17: Introduction – Dr. Hoyt Oliver

January 22: Understanding Religion

Read Molloy, Chapter 1

Judaism: Begin Reading Molloy, Chapter 8

January 24: Judaism: Introduction

January 29: History and Beliefs

January 31: History and Beliefs

February 5: Selected Sacred Texts

February 7: Selected Sacred Texts

February 12: The Holocaust and Judaism; Elie Wiesel

February 14: The Holocaust and Judaism

February 19: Test I: Judaism

Christianity: Begin Reading Molloy, Chapter 9

February 21: Christianity: Introduction

February 26: Introduction to web page creation; creation of practice page

February 28: Christianity: History and Beliefs

March 5: Christianity: History and Beliefs; Site Visit Report Discussion and Critique

March 7: Selected Sacred Texts

March 11-15: Spring Break

March 19: Selected Sacred Texts
March 21: Civil Rights and Christianity; Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
March 26: Civil Rights and Christianity
March 28: Test 2: Christianity

Hinduism: Begin Reading Molloy, Chapter 3

April 2: Hinduism: Introduction
April 4: Hinduism: History and Beliefs
April 9: Hinduism: History and Beliefs
April 11: Selected Sacred Texts
April 16: Selected Sacred Texts
April 18: Mohandas Gandhi
April 23: Mohandas Gandhi
April 25: Test 3: Hinduism

April 30: Site Visit 2 Critique and Discussion; course evaluation; discussion of take-home final exam.

*And yet, though we strain against the deadening grip of daily necessity,
I sense there is this mystery.*

— Rainer Maria Rilke
“Und doch, obwohl ein jeder von sich strebt”
Rilke’s Book of Hours: Love Letters to God