

# **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 20<sup>th</sup> 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, *Essential Writings*. For more information about these texts, see "Required Texts" below.

We thus have a number of interesting topics to investigate and discuss, and you will have some input into which topics we choose to discuss. 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.

I also invite you to attend some of the Pierce Program in Religion events this semester. This year's theme is "Religion and Politics," and two of the programs this semester will be relevant to this class and should be of interest to you: Congressman David Scott (U.S. House of Representative) on October 26 and Dr. Vernon K. Robbins (Emory University). Dr. Robbins's November 9<sup>th</sup> lecture is entitled, "The Bible and the Qur'an."

## ***II. Required Texts***

*Experiencing the World's Religions*, by Michael Molloy. 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 is an excellent way to ensure that you learn the important material in each chapter we cover. A copy of the CD-ROM is available in the library, because the CD-ROM is usually not included with used copies of the textbook.

*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.

*Essential Writings*, by Mohandas Gandhi. This text includes some of Gandhi's writings that illustrate key aspects of his view on the nature of God, spiritual practice, and ethical issues. We will closely 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 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; recall the names and characteristics of Hinduism's most popular gods; and discuss the ethical and spiritual issues raised by Mohandas Gandhi..

#### IV. Course Requirements

- A. **Tests** (300 points): There will be three major tests during the semester (tentatively: Sept 23, Oct 28, and Dec 2). 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** (80 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 (before 12:00 p.m. on Monday, Dec 13).
- C. **Site Visit Reports and Evaluations** (60 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 be will 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. Site visit reports are due online before class on Oct 5 and Dec 7.
- D. **Study/Reading Guides** (60 points): You will have numerous homework assignments in this class—most of which will be submitted online before class—and you should keep printouts of those assignments in your notebook. Many of these 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. You are required to complete study guides online before coming to class, because this will enhance our class discussions of these sacred texts.

**E. *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*.

Grades are earned as follows: 450-500 total points = A, 400-449 = B; 350-399 = C; 300-349 = D; below 300 = F. “Borderline” grades will be determined on the basis of class attendance and participation (including study guides, etc.).

## **V. *Appointments***

My office hours are Monday morning 10:00-12:00 and T/Th 10:00-11:00 a.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. E-mail is usually the quickest way to reach me. Please don’t hesitate to e-mail me or to post a question on the class Learn Link conference.

## **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 97-100 in the Oxford College Catalog), which includes the “responsibility for maintaining standards of unimpeachable honesty in all academic work” (p. 97). 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 and Major Assignments (to date)**

### **Introduction to Religion:**

August 26: Introduction: Understanding Religion

**Read Molloy, Chapter 1**

### **Judaism: Begin Reading Molloy, Chapter 8**

August 31: Judaism: Introduction (**Creation Stories Study Guide due online before class**)

September 2: History and Beliefs/Selected Sacred Texts (**Fall Accounts Study Guide due online**)

September 7: History and Beliefs/Selected Sacred Texts (**Law and Covenant Study Guide due**)

September 9: History and Beliefs/Selected Sacred Texts

September 14: History and Beliefs/Selected Sacred Texts (**Jonah Study Guide due online**)

September 16: The Holocaust and Judaism; Elie Wiesel (**Have Wiesel's *Night* read before class**)

September 21: The Holocaust and Judaism; Elie Wiesel

**September 23: Test I: Judaism**

### **Christianity: Begin Reading Molloy, Chapter 9**

September 28: Christianity: Introduction

September 30: History and Beliefs/Selected Sacred Texts (**"Nature of the Gospels" due online**)

October 5: (a) History and Beliefs/Selected Sacred Texts (**Site Visit Report 1 due online**)

(b) Site Visit Report Discussion and Critique

October 7: History and Beliefs/Selected Sacred Texts (**"Acts/Pentecost/Council" due online**)

October 9–12: Spring Break

October 14: History and Beliefs/Selected Sacred Texts (**"Doctrines and Rituals" due online**)

October 19: History and Beliefs/Selected Sacred Texts

October 21: Civil Rights and Christianity; Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (**Assigned chapters**)

October 26: Civil Rights and Christianity; Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (**Assigned chapters**)

**October 28: Test 2: Christianity**

### **Hinduism: Begin Reading Molloy, Chapter 3**

November 2: Hinduism: Introduction

November 4: History and Beliefs/Selected Sacred Texts

November 9: History and Beliefs/Selected Sacred Texts

November 11: History and Beliefs/*The Bhagavad-Gita* (**Assigned chapters**)

November 16: History and Beliefs/*The Bhagavad-Gita* (**Assigned chapters**)

November 18: *Satyagraha*; Mohandas Gandhi (film)

November 23: No class

November 25: Thanksgiving break

November 30: *Satyagraha*/Mohandas Gandhi (**Assigned chapters**)

**December 2: Test 3: Hinduism**

December 7: Site Visit 2 Critique and Discussion (**Site Visit Report 2 due online**)

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**