

Oxford College of Emory University, Spring 2008

REL_OX 150 Introduction to Sacred Texts

Instructor: Dr. Pohl

TTh 1:00-2:15, Humanities Hall 206

Office: Seney Hall 115E

Office Hours: MW 1:00-2:30, F 11:00-12:30, and by appointment

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Course Description and Objectives

This course introduces some of the world's major religious traditions through the study of their sacred texts, also referred to as "scripture(s)," and provides intellectual and scholarly frameworks for reading them. The study of sacred texts is important because it opens a window onto the specific socio-historical circumstances that shape canons and the interpreted meanings of text and tradition that people of the world's religions hold as sacred and true. Moreover, the sacred texts of the world's religions are formative influences on ideas about the divine and ultimate reality, humankind, and the cosmos, as well as understandings of ethics, family, history, and nationhood, in all cultures. Sacred oral traditions and texts contain familiar and famous religious narratives, myths, cosmogonies, alongside laws and ethical codes that shape religious worldviews and practices.

Central to all our considerations will be the question of what constitutes a sacred text (or "scripture"). We will study a wide selection of sacred texts from Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, Christian and Islamic traditions, including first-order texts which are often considered most sacred by practitioners as well as many second-order commentaries upon them, both canonical and non-canonical. The question of what is considered part of a tradition's canon of sacred texts is itself highly contentious, as canonical content can be interpreted in many different ways. We will examine from an academic perspective the functions, uses, forms and definitions of "canon" and the sacred texts contained therein, as well as explore some main interpretational methods and hermeneutical strategies employed in the histories of religions and popularly today. The goals and objectives for you as a student enrolled in this course are:

- to familiarize yourself with some of the world's major religious traditions through the study of their sacred texts,
- to understand the importance and diversity of sacred texts in the world's religious traditions,
- to question the very categories of "sacred text," "scripture," and "canon" as universal and cross-cultural concepts and to identify possible cultural biases in these terms,
- to achieve a de-centered, new understanding of what "sacred text"/"scripture" means, and, of course,
- to further develop your critical skills as a thinker, reader, writer, and speaker within and beyond the academic study of religion.

Required Readings

Course textbooks: 1. Fieser, James and John Powers. *Scriptures of the World's Religions*, second edition. (New York: McGraw Hill, 2006). This is a selection of sacred scriptures from the world's major religious traditions, including first-order and second-order religious texts and

basic introductions to the religions themselves. 2. Coward, Harold. *Scripture in World Religions*, (Maryknoll, NY: Oneworld, 2000). This is a collection of diverse chapters on forms, structures, authorities and interpretations of religious texts. The textbooks are available in the campus bookstore.

Additional readings: Other required readings, including articles, alternate translations of sacred scriptures, and selections from contemporary theologians and exegetes, will be made available either as hardcopy or electronically online.

Blackboard

This course will use the communication tools on Blackboard as well as readings and documents located there. To use Blackboard you only need to have an Emory (username@emory.edu) email account. You should update your Blackboard profile so you will be able to receive relevant emails. Grades will be posted on Blackboard as well as some helpful internet links. You would do well to acquaint yourselves with some of the web-pages, and use them as a frequent point of entry and exploration around many of the issues we will be discussing.

Requirements and Grading

You do not need to have any prior experience with the academic study of religion to take this class. However, I do expect you to work hard, and to contribute to class discussions. If you are not comfortable with the expectations for reading and writing in this class, you should consider taking another class instead. While I will lecture for part of the class almost every day, it will be conducted much more on a seminar model of examining your informed responses to the reading material. You are expected to keep up with all reading assignments. All readings are due at the beginning of each week unless noted otherwise. The readings are engaging and heavy. If you have not done the readings, it will simply be impossible for you to participate in the discussion. While we will suffer from that, the main damage will be done to your own learning and your participation grade. This equally applies to the amount of writing expected of you. Your final grade will be calculated according to the following:

Attendance and Participation (including Student Minutes and Presentations)	10%
2 Reflective Analysis Papers	10% each
Test I	15%
Test II	15%
Final Exam	20%
Research Paper	20%

(Grading Scale: A, B, C, D, F. Plus and minus grades may be given on individual assignments and final grades.)

Attendance and Participation including Student Notes and Presentation

Attendance and Participation: You must be present for class meetings in order to do well in the course. Assigned readings will be supplemented by in-class lectures, discussions, exercises, and more. You are allowed to be absent from a total of three (3) class sessions. With every additional absence your final grade for this class will go down 5%. This means you will have to plan ahead with your allowance of two absences. Talk to me ahead of time, if you foresee any difficulties for yourself with this policy. Class participation is part of the learning process. As it

is also part of the final grade there will be ample opportunity for it over the course of the semester. Apart from my lectures you will be involved in activities such as class discussion, group work with subsequent presentations, peer reviews and in-class writing. I expect you to keep up with all readings and assignments and to get the notes for missed class sessions from your peers. While I will call on you often and ask about the content of assigned readings you are strongly encouraged to ask questions and suggest topics for discussion in class on your own.

Student Minutes and Presentation: Taking notes on lectures and class discussion is a critical part of your learning experience. You are all expected to take notes during class as you will have to draw on them for your own work as well as when preparing for the tests. Your notes will also be the basis for a brief five-minute presentation that each of you is to give in class as part of your participation grade. Every day our meetings will start with one of you presenting on the previous class session. Here you will draw on your minutes/notes to give a brief summary of the main points discussed in the previous class as well as an outlook on unresolved issues and open questions which need further address. Be concise as you only have five minutes of talking time. Your peers will have a chance to comment on the accuracy of your notes and presentation and make suggestions for improvement.

Two Reflective Analysis Papers

For this course, you will write two short essays of three to four pages which are meant as an opportunity for analysis and critical reflection. You will write in a thoughtful, mature, informed, and scholarly manner on a topic of your choice relating to our course. Any topic or text relating to our course is permissible. Make sure that you offer an argument about, or interpretation of, examples mentioned in the topics of our readings and/or class discussions. The paper must not merely summarize the position maintained by another, but present your own argument, scholarly analyses and reflections. The assignment will be graded based upon quality of thesis, argument, and writing style as well as evidence of understanding and sensitive, informed level of engagement with the topic of your choosing. More concrete guidelines for the assignment can be found on BB and will be discussed in class. You also may wish to come to me with a sheet of paper that includes a title and thesis paragraph to discuss your ideas.

Format and Due Dates: Write an essay of three to four typed pages. Use 12 point font, 1" margins, and double-spacing throughout. Do not forget to number your pages. The first reflective analysis must be turned in, at the latest, by **Tuesday, February 12**. The second reflective analysis may be turned in on or before **Thursday, April 3**. You can hand in your reflective analysis papers early, but late submissions will not be accepted.

Two Tests and One Final Exam

There will be three tests over the course of the semester. The tests will cover both the reading assignments and in-class material given. Each test will consist of two parts. The first will include multiple choice, true/false, pattern match, or short identification questions. This will be followed by an essay section. The first test will cover the material from the introductory sessions up to and including our discussion of Buddhist traditions. For the second test you will be expected to demonstrate your knowledge of Jewish, Christian, and Islamic textual traditions. The final exam is cumulative. In preparation for it you will have to look back at the entire semester and reflect on the material in a synthetic and comparative manner. The time of the final may not be changed.

Research Paper

The research paper is an opportunity to engage more deeply with a particular topic of your choice related to this course. It is of greatest importance that you choose a topic of interest to you. The research paper should ideally use both primary source material and appropriate secondary and theoretical studies to focus more closely on a particular subject. You can find a list of recommended resources on the [research guide](#) available on the library webpage. Your paper must not merely summarize the position maintained by another, but present your own argument, scholarly analyses and reflections. Your argument must be amply supported by the data reviewed.

Format, Length, Deadline: Your research paper should be 8-10 pages. Use 12 point font (TNR), 1" margins, and double-spacing throughout (except for block quotations). Consistently follow one method for citing sources. Any established method is acceptable. That might mean, for instance, the methods outlined in the [MLA, APA, or Chicago Manual of Style](#). Number your pages. Include a separate title page listing your name, the title of your paper, "Religion 307 Islam" and the date. The due date for the final draft of your research paper is the last day of class. Late papers will not be accepted.

The research and writing process consists of different stages and includes a wide variety of activities such as making a decision about your research topic, locating the appropriate references and texts, devising an outline and initial bibliography for your paper, presenting your initial findings to a group of peers and eliciting feedback from them, writing a preliminary draft, and usually ends in editing and revising your paper before you turn in your final draft. You will find that I indicated different dates and deadlines for these activities on the course schedule at which I expect you to discuss your results to date with me and/or your peers.

- Week 6 (2/18-2/22): Determine research paper topic and clear it with me
- Tuesday 3/4: Three annotations
- Tuesday 3/18: Annotated bibliography (minimum of six sources)
- Tuesday 3/27: Thesis statement and outline
- Tuesday 4/15: Draft for peer review (minimum of 8 pages, completed bibliography)
- Thursday 4/17: In-class peer reviews (refer to peer review handout for guidelines)
- Tuesday 4/29 (last day of class): Turn in final draft with peer reviews attached

A Note on Facilitating a Stronger Learning Experience

Those students needing help with writing, English, or research, please also note the support provided by the Writing Center run by Dr. Adrian Ivey or the ESL program headed by Dr. Stacy Bell. If a disability requires special circumstances for you in the classroom, taking notes, or taking tests or exams, please contact [Jessalyn P. Smiley](#), the Coordinator for Disability Services for Students at Emory.

Academic Honesty

Finally, all students deserve an atmosphere of fairness, honesty and maturity. All of us at Emory University live by the standards set forth in the Honor Code which indicates that we cannot tolerate actions in others that violate this code, so I (and you) am obligated to report violations. Emory University takes this honor code very seriously, as do I, and penalties for violations are severe. Please read the Honor Code carefully; I trust you to conduct yourselves accordingly.

Course Schedule

- Week 1 (1/17) Introductions to each other and the class
The Authority and Role of Scriptures.
Reading: Coward, Preface
- Week 2 (1/22, 1/24) What is Scripture? Definitions, Development and Origins, Functions, Uses, Forms; Hermeneutics: the Art and Diversity of Interpretation
Readings: W.C. Smith, Chapter 1 from *What is Scripture?* (available on BB) and Fieser and Powers, Preface
- Week 3 (1/29, 1/31) Hindu Vedas, Upanishads, Devotions
Readings: Fieser and Powers, "Hinduism" (pp. 1-26, 34-55)
- Week 4 (2/5, 2/7) Hindu Views of Language
Coward, Chap. 4
Tuesday: 1st reflective analysis paper due
- Week 5 (2/12, 2/14) Canons of Buddhist traditions and anti-canonical schools
Readings: Fieser and Powers, "Buddhism" (all pages)
- Week 6 (2/19, 2/21) Buddhist Hermeneutics
Coward, Chap. 6
Discuss possible research paper topics with me by Friday, Feb. 22.
- Week 7 (2/26, 2/28) Test I and Library Workshop
Tuesday: Test I
Thursday: Library Workshop
- Week 8 (3/4, 3/6) Jewish Texts, Written and Oral Torah, How to Study Talmud
Readings: Fieser and Powers, "Judaism" (pp. 255-305); Coward, Ch. 1 (pp. 1-10)
Tuesday: Turn in three annotations
- March 5: Midterm reports due from professors*
March 7: Last day to drop course without academic penalty
March 10-14: No class due to the Spring Recess
- Week 9 (3/18, 3/20) Judaism, continued
Readings: Fieser and Powers, "Judaism" (pp. 305-321), Coward, Ch. 1 (pp. 10-33)
Tuesday: Turn in annotated bibliography
- Week 10 (3/25, 3/27) Scripture, Origins of Christianity and Developments
Readings: Fieser and Powers, "Christianity" (pp. 322-381); Coward, Ch. 2 (pp. 34-56)

Tuesday: Turn in thesis statement and outline

- Week 11 (4/1, 4/3) Christianity, continued
Readings: Fieser and Powers, “Christianity” (pp. 381-396); Coward, Ch. 2 (pp. 56-80)
Thursday: 2nd reflective analysis paper due
- Week 12 (4/8, 4/10) Muhammad and the Qur’an, Exegesis (*tafsir*), and Recitation (*tajwid*)
Readings: Fieser and Powers, “Islam” (pp. 398-441); Coward, Ch. 3 (pp. 81-84)
- Week 13 (4/15, 4/17) Islam (cont.) and Peer Reviews
Readings: Fieser and Powers, “Islam” (pp. 442-456); Coward, Ch. 3 (pp. 84-104)
Tuesday: Exchange copies of research paper rough drafts
Thursday: In-class peer reviews of student paper drafts: Read your peers’ paper drafts and prepare helpful comments!
- Week 14 (4/22, 4/24) Test II and Course Summary
Tuesday: Test II
Readings: Coward, Chap. 7 (Thursday)
- Week 15 (4/29) Last Day of Class: Conclusions and Review for Final Test
Final draft of Research Paper due
- Exam Week (May 1-7) Final Exam: Friday, May 2 (9:00 am-12:00 noon)