

## Rel 150 Sacred Texts

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**General Education Program Requirements:** This course fulfills HAP (Humanities, Arts, Performance) requirements.

**Note:** Student work submitted as part of this course may be reviewed by Oxford and Emory faculty/staff for the purposes of improving instruction and enhancing Emory education.

### 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 know of some of the world's major religious traditions through the study of their sacred texts,
- to recognize the importance and diversity of sacred texts in the world's religious traditions,
- to analyze and evaluate 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 construct a de-centered, new understanding of what "sacred text"/"scripture" means, and, of course,
- to develop further 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*, 5th edition. (New York: McGraw Hill, 2015). 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 involve using the online communication tools on Blackboard as well as readings and documents located there. Please acquaint yourself with Blackboard's features and different usages and use them as frequent points of entry and exploration around many of the issues we will be discussing as well as in preparation for the assignments.

## 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:

1.	Preparation and Participation	10%
2.	Academic Journal	10%
3.	1 (one) Site Visit Paper	10%
4.	2 (two) Reflective Analysis Papers	20% (10% each)
5.	Exam I and Exam II	50% (25% each)

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

### 1. Preparation and Participation (10%)

Attendance: You must be present for class meetings in order to do well in the course. The assigned readings will be supplemented by in-class lectures, discussions, exercises, and more. Make sure you arrive for class on time. Latecomers will be counted absent at the very beginning of class. Should you be late, you are permitted to enter the classroom only if you do so silently and without disturbing class proceedings. 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 three absences. Talk to me ahead of time if you foresee any difficulties for yourself with this policy.

Professional Classroom Behavior: My expectations of professionalism extend, of course, to classroom etiquette. This includes such behavior as arriving on time, staying in the classroom until an official break or the end of the class period, packing up only when class has finished, and using a computer only for class purposes. You must not use cell phones and other wireless devices during class. If you use your phone, let's say, to tweet or to check the stock market, or if your phone goes off during class, you will be counted as absent for that day.

Preparation: Reading assignments for each week are due at the beginning of each week unless noted otherwise. I expect you to keep up with all readings and assignments and to get the notes for missed class sessions from your peers. Appropriate preparation means reading the material several times, making notes, and coming to class with specific questions; part of this preparation should include consultation

with recommended readings and standard reference works in order to understand fully the argument in the text. Here are some hints for studying and learning new names and terms:

- Use the glossaries and indexes in Fieser/Powers and Coward.
- Write down notes in the margins of the books or articles after you look things up, or take notes on your computer.
- Think about names and terms in relation to key issues in the course.
- Use study questions to stimulate your intellectual journal entries.
- Outline complicated readings so you can create an overview of the subject for greater familiarity.

**Participation:** There will be ample opportunity for you to participate in our class. Apart from my lectures you will be involved in activities such as class discussion, group work with subsequent presentations, and in-class writing assignments. Additional activities and assignments including peer assessments on written and oral work will also count toward your participation grade. 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 essays. Your notes will also be the basis for **brief 2-minute presentations** 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. Be concise as you only have two minutes of talking time, and resist the temptation to provide a summary of the previous class. Instead, highlight the main points and provide details only when relevant. Your peers will provide you with feedback on your presentation's content, structure, and delivery. (Additional tips and guidelines for presentations and public speaking can be found on our Blackboard site.)

## 2. Academic Journal (10%)

For this class you are asked to keep an academic journal. The academic journal is designed to encourage you to keep up with your reading, keep you engaged with the material, enrich class discussion (as you will already have something to say), help you practice your skills in thinking critically and writing fluidly, and, finally, provide a log of your thoughts at this state in your studies. We will use Blackboard's blog function to collect your entries which also allows us to read and comment on each other's writing. Additional guidelines and descriptions can be found on our Bb site.

## 3. Site Visit Paper (10%)

For this paper (1,000 words, +/- 10%) you are required to attend a public worship service or a particular religious ceremony in a religious tradition other than your own. (See Blackboard for details.) You may choose any temple, synagogue, church, mosque, etc. that you wish, with *the rule that it must be of a faith you have never practiced*. To visit and observe worship in a religious tradition other than your own can by itself be a fascinating eye-opening experience. It will give you an insight into the actual living reality of the religion. Moreover, it is also a good way to measure the textbook's knowledge and class discussion against your own personal experiences. Part of the visit will be to interview a member of the group about what you observed. After your visit you are to write an analytical essay that provides a meaningful academic perspective on the worship service by integrating your observations and interview data with some of the scholarly theories, principles, and categories studied this semester. Please see the course schedule and Bb for deadlines and other details.

## 4. Two (2) Analysis Papers (10% each)

You will write two (2) 1,000-word essays (12 pt TNR, double-spaced, one-inch margins) over the course of the semester. These are meant as opportunities for analysis and critical, scholarly reflection. The analysis essays (see course schedule for dates) encourage you to study one topic carefully and in its

context, as you refine your ability to write clearly and argue persuasively within the academic study of religion. All essays will be take-home essays. I will post in advance of each assignment essays prompts as well as guidelines on how to write essays. I will be looking primarily for two things in your writing: a) evidence of your knowledge and understanding of class material and b) your ability to use or apply the material in ways that go beyond what you have read or heard in class. This second part can be done in many ways: you can critique the material, apply it to something else, or even just explain it in a different way. Regardless of your particular approach to the topic, you must have a specific point or claim to argue in your essay. I encourage you to write a thesis paragraph ahead of time and to discuss it with me. Many students have found that it improves the quality of their writing.

### **5. Exam I (25%) and Exam II (25%)**

There will be two exams for this class. The first exam will cover both the reading assignments and in-class material from the introductory sessions up to and including our discussion of Jewish traditions. The exam will consist of three parts: a) multiple-choice questions, b) short identifications and c) an essay section. For the second exam you will be expected to demonstrate your knowledge of Christian and Islamic textual traditions. Just like the first exam, there will be multiple-choice questions, short identifications, and an essay section for these two traditions. Additionally, however, the second exam will have another essay section in which you will be asked to look back at the entire semester and reflect on the material in a synthetic and comparative manner.

### **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. Lisa Bolding or the ESL program headed by Ms. Stacy Bell. If a disability requires special circumstances for you in the classroom, taking notes, or taking tests or exams, please contact Emory's Access, Disability Services, and Resources to initiate the accommodation request process. More detailed information is available on their website at [www.ods.emory.edu](http://www.ods.emory.edu).

### **Academic Fairness**

All students deserve an atmosphere of fairness, honesty and maturity. All of us at Oxford College live by the standards set forth in the Honor Code, which includes the "responsibility for maintaining standards of unimpeachable honesty in all academic work." The Honor Code also indicates that we cannot tolerate actions in others that violate this code, so we (and you) are obligated to report 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.