

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, Zoroastrian, Judaic, 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. Tracing the processes by which these texts came to be formed, analyzing their narrative structures, and recognizing the diversity of ways in which texts are used and interpreted are all aims of the course. Thus, the course will provide an intellectual and scholarly framework for reading sacred texts, introduce the major scriptural traditions of the world and some of the myriad of hermeneutical approaches to sacred text, while cultivating reading and writing skills, as well as critical-analytical abilities, particularly in the encounter with sacred canon.

In short, 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,
- to identify possible cultural biases in the above 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, 2004). 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.

Online Tools

This course will use the online communication tools on Blackboard as well as readings and documents located there. You would do well to get acquainted with some of the Blackboard features and use Blackboard 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. 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% (5% each)
Test I	20%
Test II	20%
Test III (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: 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 three absences. Talk to me ahead of time, if you foresee any difficulties for yourself with this policy.

If a disability requires special circumstances for you in the classroom, taking notes, or taking tests or exams, please see Disability Services on campus for proper aid. Those students needing help with writing, English, or research, please go to the Writing Center run by Dr. Adrian Ivey or the ESL program headed by Dr. Stacy Bell.

Participation: 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 the 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.

Peer Reviews of Research Papers: See the section on the Research Paper below.

Reflective Analysis Papers

These two short papers (3-4 pages, 12 pt TNR, double-spaced, one-inch margins) are meant as scholarly reflective analysis opportunities on any one reading assignment in Harold Coward's *Scripture in World Religions*. You will reflect in a thoughtful, mature, informed, and scholarly manner on a reading in Coward of your choice.

In your writing I will look for use of terminology relevant to the academic study of sacred texts, exploration of religious concepts, questioning that extends beyond class discussion, and informed attempts on your part to answer questions that arise from your interaction with the material. The criteria for grading the assignments are: a) evidence of mastery of material and informed voice, b) appropriate and relevant use of terms, concepts, and examples, c) coherent thesis, conclusion, argument and clear presentation of points, and d) depth of scholarly engagement with the material.

Three Tests

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, a short identification section and an essay section. Choices of questions will be provided. The first test will cover the material from the introductory sessions up to and including our discussion of Hindu traditions. For the second test you will be expected to demonstrate your knowledge of Buddhist, Zoroastrian and Jewish textual traditions. The third and last test will be given during exam week at the end of the semester. The test is cumulative. In preparation for it you will have to look back at the entire semester and reflect on the material, including Christian and Islamic texts, in a synthetic and comparative manner. The final exam is scheduled for **December 13** (9:00-noon). The time of the final may not be changed.

Research Paper

This assignment is designed to allow the student to become familiar with a specific hermeneutical approach, theologian or hermeneut, or religious canon. Paper Topics may be chosen from four main themes: 1. Papers that explore an interpretational method or hermeneutical strategy employed popularly today, for example in relation to current issues in world religions such as gender roles, the status of women, social justice, economic justice, sexuality, violence and conflict resolution, ecology, or religion and science, are highly encouraged. Such papers should exhibit knowledge of a specific hermeneutical approach or exegetical strategy, and intellectual grasp of the material at hand. 2. Relatedly, book reports that incorporate solid background research on the general topic on any of the sources found below in the Suggested Further Reading list are welcome. If you wish to use a source not on the list, simply get it approved by your professor. 3. Papers on the origins and developments of canon in the world's religious traditions are welcome. 4. Exegesis papers (on a particular passage/s of sacred text explored in depth) that exhibit applied knowledge of an interpretational method or hermeneutical strategy employed popularly today are welcome. Discouraged are papers based on the student's personal interpretations of scriptures and papers that compare or contrast scriptures from different religious traditions; such papers tend to be uninformed, oversimplified and vague. It is important, when working with scriptural selections, to offer the reader more than one translation. Thus, try to obtain at least two translations of the text on which you concentrate.

Your research paper should be 3,000-3,600 words. This approximately corresponds to 10-12 pages (12 pt TNR, double-spaced, one-inch margins). Please note that plagiarism is easy to spot, and harshly penalized by the University. Don't be afraid to trust your own words and scholarly analyses. The paper must include a title page, endnotes or footnotes and a bibliography.

Think of the research paper project in stages: choose a topic, compile a bibliography, engage in your research, compose an outline, write an initial draft, present your ideas before your peers, use peer reviews and feedback to revise your draft, and turn in your paper's final version. In order to facilitate the research process, there are three distinct activities and deadlines that you should meet. First, you should see your professor for approval of your topic and for help in finding sources before the fall break (see course schedule). Note: You must have cleared your topic with me via email by **October 5**. Second, around the middle of the semester you will write a progress report on your research to-date. It will provide a snapshot of your work and should include a brief description (no more than 300 words) of your research topic, interesting findings so far, as well as any difficulties you have encountered. In addition, please also attach a bibliography of the works you are using in your research. Your progress report is due on **Thursday, November 1**. Finally, you will work in assigned groups in the 14th week of the course to critique each others' papers in helpful, constructive peer reviews. Turn in a first draft of your research paper, photocopied for your peer group, on **Thursday, November 29** in class. On **Tuesday, December 4** in class, we will exchange thoughts and suggestions for improvement of the papers in order to allow you to revise your paper before turning in a final draft on **Tuesday, December 11**. Late papers will be penalized. Please refer to the peer review handout for guidelines on constructive critiques. Your professor will take part as much as possible in each group.

Academic Honesty

Finally, 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 everyone is 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, and conduct yourselves accordingly.

Schedule of Readings, Topics, and Events

Week 1 (8/30)	Introductions to each other and the class: The Authority and Role of Scriptures. Reading: Coward, Preface
Week 2 (9/4, 9/6)	What is Scripture? Definitions, Development and Origins, Functions, Uses, Forms; Hermeneutics: the Art and Diversity of Interpretation. Readings: W.C. Smith, Chapter 1 from <i>What is Scripture?</i> and Fieser and Powers, Preface
Week 3 (9/11, 9/13)	Hindu Vedas, Upanishads, Devotions. Readings: Fieser and Powers, "Hinduism" (p. 1-26, 34-55) and Coward, Chap. 4
Week 4 (9/18, 9/20)	Hinduism, continued. <u>Test I Thursday</u>
Week 5 (9/25, 9/27)	Canons of Buddhist traditions and anti-canonical schools. Readings: Fieser and Powers, "Buddhism" and Coward, Chap. 6
Week 6 (10/2, 10/4)	Buddhism, continued. Last week to <u>clear research paper topic</u> with instructor <u>Reflective Analysis Paper 1 Due</u>
Week 7 (10/11, Thursday only due to Fall Break)	Zoroastrianism: Cosmogony and Dualism in a Seminal Textual Tradition. Readings: Fieser and Powers, "Zoroastrianism"

Week 8 (10/16, 10/18) Jewish Texts, Written and Oral Torah, How to Study Talmud.
Readings: Fieser and Powers, “Judaism”; Coward, Chap. 1

(Oct 17: Midterm reports due from professors)

Week 9 (10/23, 10/25) Judaism, continued. Test II Thursday

Week 10 (10/30, 11/1) Scripture, Origins of Christianity, and Its Developments.
Readings: Fieser and Powers, “Christianity”; Coward, Chap. 2
Progress Report due on Thursday

Week 11 (11/6, 11/8) Christianity, continued

Week 12 (11/13, 11/15) Muhammad and the Qur’an, Exegesis (*tafsir*), and Recitation (*tajwid*).
Readings: Fieser and Powers, “Islam”; Coward, Chap. 3

11/20 No class: American Academy of Religion Meeting and Thanksgiving Break.

Week 13 (11/27, 11/29) Islam, continued
Thursday: Turn in photocopies of the first draft of your research paper!

Week 14 (12/4, 12/6) Peer Reviews and Course Summary.
In-class Peer Reviews of student paper drafts (Tuesday): Read your peers’ paper drafts, and prepare helpful comments!
Readings: Coward, Chap. 7 (Thursday)
Reflective Analysis Paper 2 Due

Week 15 (12/11) Conclusions and Review for Final Test (Tuesday only).
Final draft of Research Paper due

Exam Week (12/13-12/19) Final (Test III). Thursday, Dec. 13 from 9am – noon.

Suggested Further Reading and Helpful Sources

Austin, Richard Cartwright. *Hope for the Land: Nature in the Bible*. Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1990.

Badiner, Allan Hunt, ed. *Dharma Gaia: A Harvest of Essays in Buddhism and Ecology*. Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1990.

Biale, Rachel. *Women and Jewish Law: An Exploration of Women’s Issues in Halakhic Studies*. New York: Schocken, 1984.

Boff, Leonardo and Clodovis Boff. *Introducing Liberation Theology*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987.

Cabezón, José Ignacio. *Buddhism, Sexuality, and Gender*. Albany: SUNY Press, 1992.

Callicott, J. Baird and Roger T. Ames ed. *Nature in Asian Traditions of Thought*. Albany: SUNY Press, 1989.

Carmody, Denise L. *Women and World Religions*, 2nd ed. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1989.

Carmody, John. *Ecology and Religion: Toward a New Christian Theology of Nature*. New York: Paulist Press, 1983.

Chapple, Christopher Key. *Nonviolence to Animals, Earth and Self in Asian Traditions*. Albany: SUNY Press, 1993.

- Christ, Carol P. and Judith Plaskow. *Womenspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979.
- Connery, John S. *Abortion: The Development of the Roman Catholic Perspective*. Chicago: Loyola Univ. Press, 1977.
- Coward, Harold ed. *Experiencing Scripture in World Religions*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 2000.
- Coward, Harold. *Sacred Word and Sacred Text: Scripture in World Religions*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 1988.
- Denny, Frederick M. and Rodney L. Taylor, ed. *The Holy Book in Comparative Perspective*. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1985.
- Dombrowski, Daniel A. *Christian Pacifism*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991.
- DuBose, Edwin R. "Views of the Major Faith Traditions," in *Choosing Death: Active Euthanasia, Religion, and the Public Debate*, ed. Ron P. Hamel. Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1991.
- Duran, Khalid. "Homosexuality and Islam," in *Homosexuality and World Religions*, ed. Arlene Swidler. Valley Forge, PA: Trinity International, 1983.
- Esack, Farid. *Qur'an, Liberation and Pluralism*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1997.
- Feldman, David. *Birth Control in Jewish Law: Marital Relations, Contraception and Abortion as Set Forth in the Classic Texts*. New York: New York University Press, 1967.
- Fisher, Mary Pat. *Living Religions* fifth ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 2002.
- Goldman, Alex J. *Judaism Confronts Contemporary Issues*. New York: Shengold Publishers, 1978.
- Graham, William A. *Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.
- Grant, Robert. With David Tracy. *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible*. 2nd ed. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984.
- Gross, Rita M. *Buddhism After Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis and Reconstruction of Buddhism*. Albany: SUNY Press, 1993.
- Helfand, Jonathan. "The Earth is the Lord's: Judaism and Environmental Ethics," in *Religion and Environmental Ethics* 7 (1985): 93-95.
- Holm, Jean and John Bowker, ed. *Sacred Writings*. London: Pinter Publishers, 1994.
- Holtz, Barry. *Back to the Sources*. New York: Schocken Books, 1984.
- Ip, Po-Keung. "Taoism and the Foundations of Environmental Ethics," in *Religion and Environmental Crisis*, ed. Eugene Hargrove. Athens: UGA Press, 1986.
- Levering, Miriam, ed. *Rethinking Scripture: Essays from a Comparative Perspective*. Albany: SUNY Press, 1989.
- Plaskow, Judith. *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective*. San Francisco: Harper, 1991.
- Rabinowitz, Henry. "Talmud Class in a Gay Synagogue," *Judaism* 32 (1983): 433-43.
- Rosen, Jonathan. *The Talmud and the Internet: A Journey Between Worlds*. New York: Picador USA, 2000.

- Schussler-Fiorenza, Elizabeth. *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*. New York: Crossroad, 1983.
- Sharma, Arvind ed. *Today's Woman in World Religions*. Albany: SUNY Press, 1994.
- Smith, Wilfred Cantwell. *What Is Scripture? A Comparative Approach*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press 1993.
- Swidler, Arlene. *Homosexuality and World Religions*. Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1993.
- Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures*. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1988.
- Thurman, Robert A. F. "Buddhist Hermeneutics," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 46, 1 (1978), 22-23.
- Tse, Chung M. "Confucianism and Contemporary Ethical Issues," in *World Religions and Global Ethics*, ed. S. Cromwell Crawford. New York: Paragon, 1989.
- Trible, Phyllis. *Texts of Terror*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978.
- Umansky, Ellen M. "Jewish Attitudes Towards Homosexuality: A Review of Contemporary Sources," *Reconstructionist* 51 (1985): 9-15.
- VanVoorst, Robert E. *Anthology of World Scriptures*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1994.
- Wadud, Amina. *Qur'an and Woman*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Weems, Renita J. "Reading Her Way through the Struggle: African-American Women and the Bible," in *Stony the Road We Trod*. Cain Hope Felder, ed. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1991.
- Young, Serenity, ed. *An Anthology of Sacred Texts by and About Women*. New York: Crossroad, 1993.
- Young, William A. *The World's Religions: Worldviews and Contemporary Issues*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1995.
- Zehr, Howard. *Death as a Penalty: A Moral, Practical and Theological Discussion*. Elkhart, IN: Mennonite Central Committee, 1988.