

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, *Essential Writings*. 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 web pages 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. 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



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important material in each chapter we cover. A copy of the CD-ROM will be 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—a religious response to the presence of evil within society—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 (New Revised Standard Version: <http://www.devotions.net/bible/00bible.htm> or Revised Standard Version: <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/rsv/browse.html>). Since you already have five texts to purchase, and both the NRSV and the RSV Bible translations are 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).

A partial list of Internet resources that will be of help to you as we study Judaism, Christianity, and Hinduism can be found at <http://www.emory.edu/OXFORD/pierceprogram/Pierce.html> (click on "Links to Online Religion Resources").

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..

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: September 28, October 31, and December 7). 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 (Wednesday, December 20 at 5:00 p.m.).
- 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. If you would prefer to go with a group of people, we can



arrange that as well. Site visit reports are due online before class on October 12 and December 5.

- D. Study/Reading Guides** (80 points): You will have almost daily 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 ask you to complete study/reading guides before coming to class. This will enhance our class discussions of these texts. Usually 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** (80 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. 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 Monday 10:00-12:00 a.m. and Tuesday 3:45-4:45 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. 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, should 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 96-99 in the 2006-2008 Oxford College Catalog), which includes the "responsibility for maintaining standards of unimpeachable honesty in all academic work" (p. 96). 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:

August 31: Introduction: Understanding Religion

Read Molloy, Chapter 1

Judaism: Begin Reading Molloy, Chapter 8

September 5: Judaism: Introduction
September 7: History and Beliefs/Selected Sacred Texts
September 12: History and Beliefs/Selected Sacred Texts
September 14: History and Beliefs/Selected Sacred Texts
September 19: History and Beliefs/Selected Sacred Texts
September 21: The Holocaust and Judaism; Elie Wiesel
September 26: The Holocaust and Judaism; Elie Wiesel
September 28: Test I: Judaism

Christianity: Begin Reading Molloy, Chapter 9

October 3: Christianity: Introduction
October 5: History and Beliefs/Selected Sacred Texts
October 10: Fall Break
October 12: (a) History and Beliefs/Selected Sacred Texts
(b) Site Visit Report Discussion and Critique
October 17: History and Beliefs/Selected Sacred Texts
October 19: History and Beliefs/Selected Sacred Texts
October 24: Civil Rights and Christianity; Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
October 26: Civil Rights and Christianity; Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
October 31: Test 2: Christianity

Hinduism: Begin Reading Molloy, Chapter 3

November 2: Hinduism: Introduction
November 7: History and Beliefs/Selected Sacred Texts
November 9: History and Beliefs/Selected Sacred Texts



- November 14: History and Beliefs/*The Bhagavad-Gita*
 November 16: Introduction to web page creation; creation of practice page
 November 21: Group meetings/web page creation
 Paper due online (if desiring feedback)
 November 23: Thanksgiving Break
 November 28: History and Beliefs/*The Bhagavad-Gita*
 November 30: *Satyagraha*; Mohandas Gandhi
 December 5: *Satyagraha*; Mohandas Gandhi
 Site Visit 2 Critique and Discussion
December 7: Test 3: Hinduism
 December 12: Course evaluation;
 Discussion of take-home final exam.
 Final version of web page due

*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

