

Oxford College of Emory University, Spring 2010

**REL\_OX 150 Sacred Texts**

Instructor: Dr. Pohl

TTh 2:30 p.m.-3:45 p.m., Humanities Hall 201

Office: Seney Hall 115E

Office Hours: MW 1:00-2:30, F 11:30 a.m.-1:00 p.m., 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 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*, third edition. (New York: McGraw Hill, 2008). 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](mailto:username@emory.edu)) email account. 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%
Academic Journal	10%
3 Reflective Analysis Papers	10% each
Midterm Exam	15%
Final Exam	15%
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 (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. My expectations of professionalism extend, of course, to classroom etiquette. Emailing, chatting, or web-browsing are not allowed. This includes the use of cell phones 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 as well.

Preparation and 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. 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. I expect you to keep up with all readings and assignments. That 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 fully understand 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.

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 a *brief 3-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. Be concise as you only have three 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.

### **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.

Content: In your reading response you will respond to the assigned readings. These responses are meant as free reflection opportunities and provide you with outlets for your thoughts pertaining to the topics raised in the sources. Each journal entry should (1) briefly quote or summarize one passage in one assigned text for that one day, and (2) record your honest and informed reflections on the reading, connecting it to some other concept or topic relating to the course (for example, an earlier reading or discussion from our class, an item in the news,

something you have studied in another course, or a concept or theory from this or another class to which the text can be related). Each entry should engage the ideas expressed in the text in some direct and thoughtful way. The journal entry should not be about you (“I like/don’t like this”), but should be a demonstration of you making connections between the readings and some other phenomenon. I usually post study questions or topics for each week’s reading on Blackboard, but you are free to formulate your own response.

Although most of the journal entries will focus on the readings, one entry may be written in response to an approved event outside of class such as a *film*, *lecture*, or *performance* relating to the traditions and scriptures studied this semester. For these special event items, you will need to think about how to relate the event to themes discussed in class.

**Format and Due Date:** Journal entries should be 250-300 words. Each entry must be posted to Blackboard before noon on the day during which we treat the texts discussed in your journal entry. The only exceptions are approved outside events which are to be turned in before the very next class. Late postings will not be accepted. The journal entry for the last day of class is required of everyone. No journal entries can be posted after the final class session.

**Grading:** These entries will be graded as either satisfactory (S) or unsatisfactory (US). A satisfactory grad means that you posted the entry on time and followed the instructions fully. I do not grade journals for thesis and organization, as I do other written work. Rules of grammar and style, however, still apply. Put forth your best effort as there will be no opportunities to re-write unacceptable journal entries. You are free to explore a variety of writing styles and voices and do not have to arrive at some finished view or conclusion. The entries are thus informal in the sense that they are exploratory. You control how well you do on this journal assignment, since your grade is determined by how many acceptable journal entries you submit (ones graded with an “S,” that is). Here is the scale:

A=14 entries (scattered over at least 11 weeks);

B=11 entries (scattered over at least 9 weeks);

C= 8 entries (scattered over at least 7 weeks);

D= 6 entries (scattered over at least 5 weeks);

F= 4 or fewer entries.

(Plus and minus grades may be given depending on the overall quantity and quality of the posts.)

### **Three Reflective Analysis Papers (10% each)**

You will write three 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. Therefore it is essential that you not merely summarize the position maintained by another, but present your own argument, scholarly analyses and reflections. In your writing I will look for increasing use of terminology relevant to the academic study of religion, exploration of religious concepts, questioning that extends beyond class discussion, and courageous attempts on your part to answer questions that arise from your interaction with the material. Your assignments 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. More concrete guidelines for each 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.

- a. *First Analysis Paper:* The topic for the first essay is assigned (see Blackboard for details). The due date for the first analysis paper can be found on the course schedule.

- b. *Second Analysis Paper*: The topic for the second essay is self-selected (see Blackboard for details). This assignment follows the same format as the first. The one exception is that you are responsible for choosing the topic of your analysis. Any topic that relates to the traditions studied up to this point in the semester and that can be treated successfully within the parameters of the assignment is permissible. Please see the course schedule for the submission deadline.
- c. *Third Analysis Paper/Site Visit Analysis*: For your final essay you are required to attend a public worship service or a particular religious ceremony in a religious tradition covered this semester (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*. 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 about your observations as well as the interview. The due date for your Site Visit Analysis is given on the course schedule.

### **Midterm (15%) and Final Exam (15%)**

There will be a midterm exam and a final exam for this class. The midterm will cover both the reading assignments and in-class material from the introductory sessions up to and including our discussion of Judaism. The midterm will consist of two parts: a) short identifications of important names and terms for understanding the subject of the course and b) an essay section. The names and terms in section a) will be drawn from a list to be distributed in advance (BB), and you will be asked to identify and explain the significance of the selected names and terms in sufficient detail and depth. For the final exam you will be expected to demonstrate your knowledge of Christian and Islamic textual traditions. Just like the midterm, there will be a short identification and an essay section for these traditions. Additionally, however, the final exam will include 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. The time of the final may not be changed.

### **Research Paper (20%)**

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. Consistently follow the *Chicago* system for manuscript format and documentation as set forth in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 15<sup>th</sup> ed. (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2003). There are several good websites that deal with *Chicago*-style documentation (see, e.g., Blackboard/Research and Writing Help). Please observe how the manual references web pages. The due date for the final draft of your research paper is the last day of class. Late papers will not be accepted.

**Writing Process and Grading:** The 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. In order to increase intentionality in the writing process, your research paper will develop in stages over the course of the semester and will go through a series of evaluations and revisions (see below). The grade for the research paper project will be calculated as follows: 15% for the final draft and 5% for the stage-by-stage assignments in the research and writing process. You will find that I indicated different dates and deadlines for these assignments and activities on the course schedule as follows:

- Tuesday 3/16: Preparation statement on research paper topic (BB)
- Thursday 3/18: Research workshop
- Sunday 3/21: “Discover Your Topic” (worksheet, BB)
- Friday 3/26: First set of annotations (3 books, BB)
- Friday 4/2: Second set of annotations (3 articles, BB)
- Friday 4/9: Thesis statement and outline (BB)
- Tuesday 4/20: Draft for peer review (minimum of 8 pages, completed bibliography)
- Thursday 4/22: In-class peer reviews (refer to peer review handout for guidelines)
- Monday 4/27 (last day of class): Turn in final revised draft (BB). Late papers will not be accepted.

### **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. Adriane 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 the Office of Disability Services to initiate the accommodation request process. More detailed information is available on the website at [www.ods.emory.edu](http://www.ods.emory.edu).

### **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 (1/14) Introductions to each other and the class

MLK Day: Monday, January 19

Week 2 (1/19, 1/21) The Academic Study of Religion: What is religion and how do we study it academically? What is Scripture?  
Readings: Fieser and Powers, Preface; Coward, Preface; Gary E. Kessler, *Studying Religion: An Introduction through Cases* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2003), Chapters 1 and 2, 3-32.

Week 3 (1/26, 1/28) Hindu Vedas, Upanishads, Devotions  
Readings: Fieser and Powers, "Hinduism" (all pages)

Week 4 (2/2, 2/4) Hindu Views of Language  
Coward, Ch. 4; Kinsley (BB) and Bynum (BB).

Week 5 (2/9, 2/11) Buddhist Scriptures and Major Themes  
Readings: Fieser and Powers, "Buddhism" (all pages)

Week 6 (2/16, 2/18) Buddhist Views of Language, Anti-canonical Schools, Buddhist Feminist Hermeneutics  
Readings: Coward, Ch. 6; Tsomo, "Mahaprajapati's Legacy" (BB)  
Sunday: Reflective Analysis Paper I (BB)

Week 7 (2/23, 2/25) Jewish Texts: Biblical History and the Biblical Canon  
Readings: Fieser and Powers, "Judaism" (all pages)

Week 8 (3/2, 3/4) Judaism: Written and Oral Torah, How to Study Talmud; Jewish Feminist Hermeneutics  
Readings: Coward, Ch. 1; Plaskow's "The Coming of Lilith" and "Jewish Memory." (BB)

*Last day for dropping courses without academic penalty: Friday, March 5*  
*Spring Recess: Monday, March 8-Friday, March 12*

Week 9 (3/16, 3/18) Midterm and Library Workshop  
Tuesday: Midterm; turn in preparation statement on research paper topic (BB)  
Thursday: Library Workshop  
Sunday: Turn in "Discover Your Research Topic" worksheet (BB)

Week 10 (3/23, 3/25) Scripture, Origins of Christianity and Developments  
Readings: Fieser and Powers, "Christianity" (all pages)  
Friday: First set of annotations: 3 books (BB)

- Week 11 (3/30, 4/1) Christianity, continued  
Readings: Coward, Ch. 2; Williams or Weems (BB)  
Friday: Second set of annotations: 3 articles (BB)  
Sunday: Reflective Analysis Paper II (BB)
- Week 12 (4/6, 4/8) Muhammad and the Qur'an  
Readings: Fieser and Powers, "Islam"  
Friday: Thesis statement and outline
- Week 13 (4/13, 4/15) Islam (cont.): Recitation (*tajwid*) and Exegesis (*tafsir*)  
Readings: Coward, Ch. 3; Wadud or Mernissi (BB)  
Friday: Last opportunity to turn in Reflective Analysis Paper III (site visit)
- Week 14 (4/20, 4/22) The Future of Sacred Texts & Research Paper Workshop (Peer Review)  
Reading: Coward, Ch. 7  
Tuesday: Exchange copies of research paper drafts (hard copies for peers; also submit electronic copy on BB)  
Thursday: In-class peer reviews of student paper drafts: Read your peers' paper drafts and prepare helpful comments!
- Week 15 (4/27) Last Day of Class: Conclusions and Review for Final Exam  
Final draft of Research Paper due

Final Exam: Tuesday, May 4 (9:00-12:00)