

**REL 100Q-03A1, Introduction to Religion**  
**Spring 2013, 4926**  
**M/W 3:45-5:25pm, Seney 208**  
**Writing Section, INQ-Based**

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**Office hours: open**  
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### **Course Description**

This writing-intensive, inquiry-based course will serve as a basic introduction to religion as an academic field of study. We will employ major categories of the discipline with which to better penetrate and analyze the two major religious and philosophical traditions that are the foci of the course: Buddhism and Native American Traditions. Group and individual projects explore more traditions of student choice and interest. The class will focus upon traditions' key historical developments and diverse, contemporary forms via the students' own explorations and discoveries, starting with the most basic and exciting question, "What do you want to know?" and the effort to answer the question from firmly within the perspective of the scholar of religion. In this manner, the student will learn how to inquire and think like the religion scholar in the comparative study of world religions.

Inquiry-based learning in our course involves reading and analyzing primary and other sources from within a religious tradition, as well as reading and analyzing case studies and scholars' works on religious communities and their practices. Inquiry-based learning requires that students embark on a journey of questioning within our scholarly study in order to learn more about the academic discipline of the comparative study of world religions. In other words, you will be asked to investigate the religious traditions we study via your own increasingly independent research, scholarly vocabulary and reflective analysis projects. Primarily through your own processes of inquiry, you will become familiar with the methods and categories employed in the comparative study of world religions. In addition, you will be asked to reflect in a disciplined manner in order to cultivate an appreciation for such methods and categories and to critique and offer improvements to them. In short, the student will become, ideally, an independent religion scholar.

An aim of any study of cultural traditions is an understanding of the basic assumptions and practices of different peoples. A fundamental aim of this course is also an informed appreciation and respect for the diverse traditions studied. The discipline of comparative religious studies is not a means to evaluate traditions for worth, but a scholarly means of determining patterns, commonalities and differences between religious practices, beliefs, and traditions in general while recognizing the unique characteristics of and pluralities within each religion of the world. Of particular use will be the comparative religious studies topics known as the elements of a religious worldview and the forms of religious experience. It is our main goal to understand these elements and forms via fruitful inquiry. Again, students will also be encouraged to reflect analytically upon the methodologies and scholarly categories within the course. We will question the very categories of comparative religious studies, identify possible cultural biases in the discipline's vernacular, and hopefully achieve a de-centered, new understanding of how "religion" can be defined.

### **Course Objectives**

From the foregoing you can see that the ultimate aim of the course is to neither glorify nor critique any one tradition but rather to equip you with an understanding and skills in the study of religion as an academic discipline. In short, the goals and objectives for you as a student in this course are:

- to learn how to ask useful questions within the framework of the comparative study of world religions
- to familiarize yourself with patterns, commonalities, and differences in religious worldviews,
- to think both empathetically and critically about different religious traditions from within a scholarly perspective,
- to develop the ability to interpret texts and other cultural phenomena (such as rituals, myths,

- architecture) that have religious presuppositions or implications,
- to explore, question, discover, and reflect analytically upon the methodologies and scholarly categories employed in the academic study of religion,
- to develop further your critical skills as a thinker, reader, writer, and speaker within and beyond the academic study of religion, particularly in order to identify and deconstruct stereotypes.
- To conduct an individually designed project of inquiry in the discipline of religion with successful research results.

### **Course Requirements and Grading**

You do not need prior experience with the academic study of religion to take this class. I do, however, 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. You are expected to keep up with and master all reading assignments. 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, test and exam grades, performance in paper assignments and your participation grade. One's final grade will be calculated according to the following:

Participation	10%
4 Tests	20% (5% each)
Group Research Project and Presentation	10%
2 Reflective Analysis Papers	20% (10% each)
Research/Site Visit/Interview Paper	20%
Final Exam	20%

### **Attendance and Participation including Student Notes, Peer Reviews, and Presentation**

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, writing and more. 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. You will be involved in activities such as class discussion, group work with subsequent presentations, peer reviews, discussions with your professor about your writing 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. I will call on you often to ask about the content of assigned readings, and you are strongly encouraged to ask questions and suggest topics for discussion in class on your own. 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. Lateness will be counted as absence. Talk to your professor 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. The campus library staff is available for help with sources, research projects, citation styles and methods, citation rules and more.

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; you will have to draw on them for your own work throughout the semester. Your notes will also be the basis for a brief five-minute presentation that you are to give solo or in pairs in class as part of your participation grade. Every day our meetings will start with one or two 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. You will also provide a discussion

question based on the previous material for the class. With aid from the professor, you will lead class discussion on that topic.

**Inquiry Sessions and Break-out Groups:** Break-out groups in class will discuss the Livingston reading assignment contents, including the categories, methodologies and theories in Livingston's chapters, and apply the knowledge to what has been learned via the previous readings on and discussions about Buddhism and Native American traditions. How do the vocabulary, categories and theories explained in Livingston's book apply to the religious beliefs, practices and lives we read about in Buddhism and Native American religions? What works? What fits? What doesn't? What can be improved? Be prepared with your own formal questions to bring to your break-out group discussion: you will be required to present your questions to your group. Informal discussion in class occurs often. Bring in questions from your readings, and be prepared to speak in class.

**Peer Reviews of Papers:** See the section on the Research/Site Visit/Interview Paper below.

### **Group Research Project and Presentation**

You will be assigned to a group and given a task in the form of research problem to be solved or topic to be explored via effort in the library. Interviewing students from the relevant religious tradition/s is also allowed. After your group has gathered the necessary information, and documented the sources used, your group will make a presentation to the class. You have ten minutes of talking time; plan and rehearse your presentation as a group. All members of the group should speak in the presentation. You must summarize the problem/s or topic/s you were provided, the scholarly means of exploration your group members chose and employed, and the answers you discovered.

In addition, your presentation should include at least one new question that arose from the task: in other words, what new questions can you ask given what you learned? If you were to engage in further study on the topic, what questions would you like to ask? This is what religion scholars often do. We formulate theses in our research by first asking useful questions; then after attempting to answer the questions with a sound thesis, we commonly posit new questions for future research.

### **Reflective Analysis Papers**

These two short papers (4-5 pages, 12 pt TNR, double-spaced, one-inch margins) are meant as scholarly reflection opportunities on any one topic or issue from your reading assignments, class discussions, course film or media items, or lectures to date. You will reflect in a thoughtful, mature, informed, and scholarly manner. For each paper, you should focus on one topic in depth; broadly defined topics tend to result in oversimplifications and unhelpful generalizations. Thus, choose your thesis well, and narrow your topic in an appropriate manner for this assignment.

In your writing I will look for relevant, independently done research, increasing use of terminology relevant to the academic study of religion, 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 evidenced by appropriate and relevant use of terms, concepts, theories, and scholarly sources; b) application of scholarly theories or frameworks to your own observations from the source material you chose; c) coherent thesis, conclusion, argument and clear presentation of points; and d) focused discipline and depth of scholarly engagement with the material, including criticisms of and suggestions for improvement of the scholarly concepts or theories used. Correct citation usage and bibliographies are expected. MLA style is suggested. Choose one style of citation, and be correct and consistent with it. **Papers are due in hard copy in class on the due dates**, no later. Late papers are not accepted. Common sense tells you not wait until the last moment to print your submissions. Please see schedule for due dates.

## Tests and Final Exam

In this course, students do not learn knowledge sets then discard them but instead constantly build upon the knowledge gained throughout the semester. Careful reading of assignments provides the foundation for productive group discussions, reflective analyses, research projects and more. Four tests are designed to evaluate one's grasp of foundational knowledge and will cover the reading assignments in detail. You will be quizzed upon the terms, concepts, theorists and theories found in the Livingston readings and on the events and peoples in the other readings required up to that testing period. You may be asked to apply this information to topics covered in lectures, discussions and other exercises in class.

The final exam will cover both the reading assignments and in-class material. The exam is comprehensive and cumulative and will test your skills in using the vernacular of comparative religious studies in an integrated, creative, masterful manner. In preparation you must reflect on the course material in a comparative, scholarly manner. You may also be asked to reflect critically upon the categories and methodologies we have employed in class.

You must bring a pen with blue or black ink to tests. See the **schedule of readings, topics and events below for test and exam dates**.

## Research/Site Visit/Interview Paper

One paper on a topic of the individual student's choice is also required. This paper should be between 10 and 12 pages long, typed, double-spaced (use 12pt font and one-inch margins). Any topic, tradition, or text relating to our course is permissible, but the project must showcase your own skills as a religion scholar. Ask useful, discipline-specific questions about your chosen topic, and formulate a thesis through your sound research. Support your thesis with research evidence. A successful paper will exhibit an informed perspective from within the study of religion, in-depth research, mastery of relevant vernacular, and a convincingly argued conclusion.

You have much freedom regarding this assignment. You may write a research paper without interview or site visit descriptions, a paper on a site visit that incorporates research, or an interview/s-centered paper that incorporates research. As this is a research paper at foundation, citations and a list of references are of course required. MLA style is suggested. It is perfectly fine for you to undertake these site visits in small collaborative groups. Each group member, however, must write an individual paper. When visiting in a group, please be careful to avoid intimidation of the community members of whom you are a guest, particularly when interviewing: groups must be polite.

Please note again that Site Visit or Interview Papers must also show preparedness in research; in other words, your paper must not only be descriptive or simply transcribe an interview. It must be meaningfully explanatory, as well. Please see the professor not only for approval of your topic but also for help in finding resources. Note: You must have cleared your topic with me via email by **March 27**. The paper should exhibit your applied knowledge of approaches and intellectual grasp of the material at hand. Of greatest importance is that you choose a topic that interests you. Plagiarism is easy to spot, and harshly penalized by the University. Don't be afraid to trust your own words and scholarly analyses. 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, attach an outline of your research paper and a bibliography of the works you are using or planning to use in your research. Internet sources other than those via the library online are strongly discouraged, as most are unscholarly; "wiki" encyclopedias are absolutely not allowed. Your progress report is due in class **April 8**.

Finally, assigned group members will critique each others' papers in helpful, constructive peer reviews. Email the first draft of your research paper to your assigned peer group members **April 15**. On **April 22** peer reviews are due in class; we will exchange thoughts and suggestions for improvement of

the papers via the written peer reviews and discussion. This will allow you to revise your paper before turning in a final draft, with the peer reviews you received attached, **April 30**. Late papers will not be accepted. Please refer to the peer review handout for guidelines on critiques.

Remember that your professor is available to help you at any time in the semester. If my office hours are not convenient for you, please make an appointment or email me. Your research project is yours, however, and the choices of topic, approach, thesis and conclusion are your own decisions.

### **Online Tools**

This course will use the online communication tools on Blackboard as well as readings and documents located there. Please get acquainted with some of the online features and use Blackboard frequently to consult our syllabus, assignments, documents and more. Due to the introductory-level and writing-intensive nature of the class, all assignments will be submitted to the professor and returned with comments from the professor in hard copy.

### **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 we all 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 trust you to conduct yourselves accordingly.

### **In Class**

Bring no food in the classroom. Silence your cell phones, and refrain from use. Phones must be off for tests. Lateness for class is counted as absence. Those wishing to use a notebook computer in class may do so but must sit in the front row. Submit your assignments in plenty of time before a final deadline; never wait until the last moment to print and risk being late to class. This is a course with a heavy reading load, high expectations for student participation, and an intensive schedule; consider your choice of this class with care and maturity.

### **Required Course Texts**

1. Black Elk and John G. Neihardt. *Black Elk Speaks: Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000.
2. Sam Gill. *Native American Religions: An Introduction*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2004.
3. Walpola Rahula. *What the Buddha Taught*. New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1974.
4. Tenzin Gyatso, His Holiness the Dalai Lama. *Freedom in Exile: the Autobiography of the Dalai Lama*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1990.
5. James C. Livingston. *Anatomy of the Sacred*. Sixth Edition. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2009.

These texts are available in the bookstore. Primary and other secondary readings may be made available either in class or online.

### **Schedule of Readings, Topics, and Events**

Section One: Inquiry? What's inquiry? What makes a religion scholar? And who's asking?

Week 1      (1/16)      Introductions to each other and the class

Reading: Syllabus

Week 2 (1/23) What is the Study of Religion?  
Reading: Livingston, Chapters 1-4 (What Is Religion? – Sacred Symbol, Myth and Doctrine)

Week 3 (1/28, 1/30) Cont'd

Test 1 Wednesday

Also: Begin *Black Elk Speaks*

Section Two: Native American Lakota Religions and Practices.

Week 4 (2/4, 2/6) Lakota and Sioux practices: Dance is Reality.  
Reading: Gill's *Native American Religions*, Finish *Black Elk Speaks*  
Reflective Analysis Paper 1 due Wednesday

Week 5 (2/11, 2/13) Forms of Religious Experience and Expression.  
Reading: Livingston, Chapters 5-9 (Sacred Scripture – Cosmogony)  
Test 2 Wednesday

Week 6 (2/18, 2/20) Break-out group activities, media.  
Presentations of group task results due Wednesday.

Section Three: Buddhist Beliefs and Practices.

Week 7 (2/25, 2/27) Four Noble Truths.  
Reading: the Dalai Lama's *Freedom in Exile*

Week 8 (3/4, 3/6) The Eightfold Path of Buddhism.  
Reading: Rahula's *What the Buddha Taught*

Spring Break

Week 9 (3/18, 3/20) Elements of a Religious Worldview.  
Reading: Livingston, Chapters 10-13 (Views of Anthropology – Soteriology)  
Test 3 Wednesday

Week 10 (3/25, 3/27) Break-out group activities, media items.  
By Wednesday: Individual Research Paper topic approved.

Section Four: Group Research Project and Presentations.

Week 11 (4/1, 4/3) Assigned group members meet.  
Reflective Analysis Paper 2 due Monday.  
Group Presentations Wednesday.

Section Five: Individual Research Project.

Week 12 (4/8, 4/10) Religion in Modernity  
Reading: Livingston, Chapters 14-15 (Part IV)  
Progress Reports due Monday.  
Test 4 Wednesday

Week 13 (4/15, 4/17) Religion and Modernity: Challenges.  
Romanticizations and Demonizations of Religious Peoples.  
Reading: Lopez on Orientalism (to be supplied)  
Rough Drafts for Peer Reviews due to peers Monday via email to each other.

Week 14 (4/22, 4/24)      Conclusions and Review for Final. Redefining “Religion”  
Peer Review Day in Class Monday.

Reading Day is April 30.   Research/Site Visit/Interview Papers due.

Exam Week      Final Exam: May 2, 2:00-5:00pm.

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