

# REL 150WR - Sacred Texts - Spring 2017

TTh 1:40-3:20 p.m. (Seney Hall 310)

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Office: Seney Hall 115B

Hours: MW 3:00-4:00 p.m., or by appointment

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**General Education Program Requirements:** This course fulfills HAP (Humanities, Arts, Performance) and CWR (Continuing Writing).

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## Course Description

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 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.

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## Course Objectives

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.
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## 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.

You will be expected to have the assigned readings with you, whether from the textbook or the Canvas files, in class each day. Please include the printing of online documents as part of your book budget.

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## Canvas Learning Technology

This course will involve using the online communication tools on Canvas as well as readings and documents located there. You would do well to acquaint yourself with the features Canvas offers 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.

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## Course Requirements and Grading

The Final Grade will be calculated as follows:

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|----------------------------------|-----|
| 1. Preparation and Participation | 10% |
| 2. Reading Responses             | 10% |
| 3. Site Visit Paper              | 10% |

4.	Analysis Paper I	20%
5.	Analysis Paper II	20%
6.	Final Analysis Project	30%
	First Paper (15%)	
	Revised Paper (15%)	

## 1. Preparation and Participation (10%)

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 to understand fully the argument in the text.

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 must 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.

## 2. Reading Responses (10%)

For this class, you are asked to write short analytical responses to the assigned readings (250-300 words). This task 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 the discussion function on Canvas to collect your entries which also allows us to read and comment on each other's writing. [See Canvas for more details.](#)

## 3. Site Visit Paper (10%)

For this paper (1,000 words, +/- 10%) you are required to attend a public worship service or a religious ceremony in a religious tradition other than your own. 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. [See Canvas for more details.](#)

#### 4.-5. Analysis Paper I and Analysis Paper II (20% each, 40% total)

The analysis essays 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 of 1,200 words (+/- 10%). I will post in advance of each assignment essay prompts as well as guidelines on how to write the essays. I will be looking 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 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. Support for your writing will also come from your peers through a peer review process. [See Canvas for more details.](#)

#### 6. Final Analysis Project (30%): First Paper (15%), Revised Paper (15%)

Your final assignment asks you to write analysis essay of 1,500 words (+/- 10%). The guidelines for the previous inquiry essays also apply to the final essay. Different from the earlier assignments, however, the final analysis essay gives you the opportunity to reflect in a thoughtful, mature, informed, and scholarly manner on **a topic of your choice** relating to our course. Any topic or text that relates to and draws on the materials from this course is permissible. Make sure that you offer an argument about, or interpretation of, the topic you choose. Make one overall point. Do not try to do too much. The point of this assignment is to encourage depth, since the journals encourage breadth.

The grade for the final analysis project will be calculated as follows: First Paper (15%) and Final Revised Paper (15%). You cannot expect to produce your best writing when you first get started. Thus, revising your work is an integral part of successful writing. Revising is a process of rethinking your paper and differs from simple proofreading. As you revise your paper you must reconsider your argument, review your evidence, refine your purpose, and reorganize your presentation. [See Canvas for more details.](#)

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## Policies

### Attendance

You must be present for class meetings to do well in the course. You should aim to arrive to class meetings a couple minutes early having read the assignment and taken notes, including at least two questions or observations to contribute to discussion. 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 should 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 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, and packing up only when class has finished.

## Devices in Class

You may utilize laptops and tablets in their capacity as learning aids during class. You may not use them for communicating, browsing, gaming, doing schoolwork for other courses, or otherwise departing from the task at hand during the brief periods of the week we will spend together. Your phone(s) should be powered down, or in airplane mode, and stowed during class. If you find yourself needing to access the day's reading on your phone, or are expecting a time-sensitive call, announce it before class begins.

## Office Hours and Opportunities for Conferencing about Your Writing

The number and nature of the writing assignments make this a writing-intensive course. Peer reviews, class discussion, and written feedback that I give you on your assignments are meant to help you reflect on your writing and to enhance your written work through a series of revisions. In addition to these formal procedures, I also encourage you to see me during my office hours for us to reflect together on how to improve your writing. If my office hours conflict with your schedule, I will be happy to make an appointment with you at a more convenient time. At a minimum, I expect everyone to stop by my office at least once in the semester—by yourself, in pairs, or in small groups. Bring a piece of writing together with feedback and comments so that we have something to start our discussion.

## Academic Integrity

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. See the Honor Code:

<http://oxford.emory.edu/academics/student-services/student-honor-code>

## Access, Disability Services, and Resources

It is the policy of Emory University to make reasonable accommodations for qualified students with disabilities. Students with any condition such that the requirements of this class present a problem should make this known to the instructor as soon as possible and contact Access, Disability Services, and Resources for documentation:

<http://equityandinclusion.emory.edu/access>

## Affirmative Action & Sexual Harassment

All persons shall have equal access to programs, facilities, admission, and employment without regard to personal characteristics not related to ability, performance, or qualifications as determined by university policies. Discrimination against any person because of age, ancestry, color, disability or handicap, national origin, race, religious creed, gender, sexual orientation, or veteran status is unacceptable.