

HTS 4065 SEMINAR:
"GREAT RELIGIOUS PROPHETS VIEWED HISTORICALLY:
MUHAMMAD, JOSEPH SMITH, JESUS"
[REVISED]

Lawrence Foster
121 Old CE Building
Phone: 404-894-6845
e-mail: larry.foster@hts.gatech.edu

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Wednesday, 3:00-6:00 p.m.

The nature of genius--great and recognized creativity in fields such as science, art, politics, and religion--remains an elusive topic that has been investigated extensively without leading to clear and recognized criteria for assessing and accounting for such creativity. Religious genius--especially the prophetic leadership of the founders of new religious movements--has proven even more difficult to evaluate with any degree of openness and objectivity. Adherents to new faiths often accept uncritically their prophetic leader's claims to have discovered a unique handle on ultimate truth, while naive critics and apostates, in equally one-dimensional fashion, tend to see nothing but fraud and delusion in such claims. Neither approach begins to do justice to the complexities that characterize the classic foundational phenomena that the noted American psychologist William James explored so convincingly in his still-unsurpassed analysis of the psychology of religious genius, The Varieties of Religious Experience.

This unusual seminar will focus on the complex and fascinating question of what we may be able to learn historically about three important foundational religious leaders who have profoundly influenced the development of the modern world--Muhammad, Joseph Smith, and Jesus of Nazareth. The first and last figures to be considered--Muhammad and Jesus of Nazareth--between them inspired the foundation of the two largest religious movements in the world today, movements that constitute the official faiths of approximately one-half of all human beings now living on earth. The other figure, Joseph Smith, who founded the Mormon religious movement during the first half of the nineteenth century, is of special interest because he provides an unparalleled opportunity to analyze historically the founder of a thoroughly-documented, rapidly-expanding, and relatively recent religious movement that is undergoing a continuing process of change and transformation.

Whether for good or for ill, therefore, the impact that these three religious leaders and their movements have had and will continue to have deserves serious historical investigation. As much as possible throughout this course, we shall seek both (1) to understand what these prophetic leaders themselves may have been trying to accomplish and (2) to assess their actions and impact using critical historical perspectives.

In order to explore the lives and impact of each of these leaders using an explicitly historical (as opposed to an in-house religious or theological) perspective we shall focus upon the following key questions (as well as others) for each figure: (1) What are the historical records--and the limitations of those records--upon which a convincing historical understanding of each of these individual's lives and impact might be constructed? (2) What was the formative historical context within which each of these figures grew up and developed his distinctive understanding of the world? (3) What may we be able to understand, at least provisionally, about the nature and dynamics of the powerful

transformational religious experiences that led each of these figures to develop a sense of personal prophetic identity and mission? (4) What were the major challenges and conflicts that developed as each of these figures attempted to share a message that he saw as profoundly significant with the rest of the world? And (5) How and why did each of these figures eventually achieve a remarkable degree of success, even if--in two of the three cases--that success was primarily posthumous?

Since this will be a different type of seminar than most students have experienced, let me be as explicit and candid as I can about the potentially unfamiliar--and for some students, also potentially disturbing--approach that I shall be using. This seminar will seek to discover and explore--to the fullest extent possible during our limited time--what we may be able to learn historically about what each of these religious leaders may have been like as actual flesh-and-blood human beings. We shall sympathetically-yet-critically seek to analyze each of these great leaders as historical actors in their own right, not simply as marionettes manipulated by strings pulled by the Divine.

Although this seminar will not attempt to address the historically unanswerable question of whether each of these figures may also have been, in some sense, "divinely inspired" as he developed his distinctive prophetic sense of mission and leadership, I shall always try to moderate our discussions in a respectful manner that leaves open the possibility that the remarkable visionary and religious phenomena whose human dimensions we are seeking to understand better in this seminar may also have involved a "higher," "non-human" dimension.

Such a secular historical effort to understand these often-revered religious figures may not be to the liking of all students. Indeed, some students may even decide to opt out of the seminar as a result. I can understand and sympathize with such a reaction, yet I am also convinced that if students are willing to make the effort to participate fully and openly in this seminar, they may not only be able to develop a deeper and more finely-nuanced understanding of the complexity of the human mind and spirit that each of these leaders embodied, but also, if they happen to be religious, they may also be able to develop a richer and more nuanced appreciation of and commitment to their own personal faith, as well.

The above paragraphs and caveats are quite unusual in an academic history syllabus. The remainder of this syllabus, therefore, will return to more nuts-and-bolts questions as: What are the seminar's requirements? How will our seminar be structured? What are the reading and research requirements? and, How will my seminar grade be determined?

REQUIRED BOOKS: I have chosen three core books to serve as our starting points for understanding these three figures, as well as two additional required books on Muhammad and Jesus, since these figures are especially difficult to analyze historically. In addition to the five core books, a variety of shorter articles and handouts will contribute to our discussions. Note that all five of the required books are available only at the Engineer's Bookstore.

Students are expected to have carefully read and thought about each of the assigned readings in advance of the seminar session in which they are to be discussed and to participate actively in discussing the readings during the seminar. Attendance at all the weekly sessions of the seminar is mandatory, except under the most exceptional circumstances such as near-fatal illness or accident.

For **Muhammad**, our core biography will be Daniel C. Peterson's Muhammad: Prophet of God (2007), arguably the finest brief scholarly biography of Muhammad by a non-Muslim now available. To provide a mainstream Sunni Muslim interpretation of Muhammad, we shall read substantial selections from Rafiq Zakaria's Muhammad and the Quran (1991, unfortunately now out-of-print), three copies of which have been placed on GT Library reserve. For a sophisticated Shi'ite scholarly interpretation of Muhammad's life, we shall read the first hundred pages of Reza Aslan's No god but God: The Origin, Evolution, and Future of Islam (2006). Also highly recommended is W. Montgomery Watt's brilliant brief biography, Muhammad: Prophet and Statesman (orig. 1961), a copy of which has also been placed on Library reserve.

For **Joseph Smith**, I have made the unusual decision to select as our overview introduction to the Mormon prophet's life, the first two hundred pages of the superb biography of Joseph Smith's wife Emma, Mormon Enigma: Emma Hale Smith, second edition (1994) by Linda King Newell and Valeen Tippetts Avery. In addition to providing a female perspective on the life of her better-known husband, Emma's biography provides an entree into the complexity of Joseph Smith's adult life and career. Also on Library Reserve are the two indispensable scholarly biographies of Joseph Smith, namely: Fawn M. Brodie, No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith, The Mormon Prophet, second revised edition (1945, 1971) and by Richard Lyman Bushman, Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling (2005). The two books convey divergent, yet often complementary, perspectives on Joseph Smith's life and prophetic career.

For **Jesus of Nazareth**, the most written-about and possibly the least-understood man in human history, I believe that Bart D. Ehrman's Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium (1999), now stands as the perhaps the most reliable and accessible brief overview treatment that deals both (1) with the sources upon which a historically-plausible life of the historical Jesus might be reconstructed and also with (2) one particular reconstruction of the historical Jesus an apocalyptic prophet preaching the immanent arrival of the God's reign on earth. Also important will be E. P. Sanders' The Historical Figure of Jesus (1993), a brilliant analysis that considers the life of the historical Jesus within the context of first-century Palestine and explains many of the most important questions and findings that historical Jesus scholarship today has investigated, as well as some conclusions about the historical Jesus that Sanders believes are widely accepted by mainstream scholarship today.

In addition to the readings and our related discussions, I hope to enliven and add depth to our seminar by inviting outside speakers who are knowledgeable about these religious leaders to speak to our seminar. Outside of our regular seminar sessions (and likely in conjunction with pizza parties), I also plan to show two full-length films. The first, a three-hour epic entitled "The Message," conveys the sweep and dynamism of Muhammad's life and mission, without ever showing the key actor himself, in deference to Islam's opposition to any physical depiction of their prophet. The other is a four-hour PBS "Frontline" documentary entitled "From Jesus to Christ." It skillfully explains mainstream scholarly approaches that help us to understand Jesus better within his historical context, as well as how the movement he inspired was gradually transformed into an important new religion. That documentary will be shown in two successive installments, also in conjunction with pizza parties. Portions of a briefer film on Joseph Smith and early Mormonism will also be shown during the relevant seminar session. In addition, I plan to experiment with a

variety of other ways to encourage lively discussions. Throughout the seminar, I'll welcome student suggestions about how to make our seminar discussions most stimulating and effective.

EVALUATION IN THE SEMINAR: The most important basis for determining each student's grade in this seminar will be researching and writing an original scholarly paper, using primary sources, that relates to one of these leaders. The research paper should be at least twenty pages in length and use standard historical source citation. During the first or second session of our seminar, I shall discuss the research paper requirement in greater detail and I shall propose some specific questions/topics about which good research papers might be written. To aid students in identifying and developing their research topics, I shall also meet individually with each student during the first several weeks of the seminar, in order to assess each student's interests and capabilities and to offer assistance, as needed.

The research papers for the seminar will count as 50% of each student's grade. The completed papers will be due in final form no later than Friday, April 22--the Friday before dead week-- two weeks before the last day of final exam week. I must have all research papers by that time (or earlier) so that I can read them and--if necessary--consult with students whose papers may fall short of their full potential and thus might benefit from further revision or development during the final two weeks of the semester.

Rather than asking students to present their completed research papers to the group near the very end of the seminar, I plan instead to ask each student--during the middle of the semester, and at least a month before the final drafts of their research papers are due--to make a 5- to 7-minute presentation on their topic, their key findings, and their anticipated conclusions. I'll also ask students to discuss any problems they may have encountered in researching their papers, as well as any unresolved issues they expect to face in completing the best possible research papers for the course. I believe that using such mid-stage student presentations, supplemented by input from fellow students and the professor, will motivate seminar participants to begin serious work on their research projects promptly, enabling them to identify potential problems with their topics or available research sources early enough to address them effectively. The mid-seminar student presentations about the status of their research projects will count for another 10% of each student's seminar grade.

In order to encourage livelier and better-informed student discussions of the readings/topics throughout the seminar, I also plan to ask one-third of the seminar students each week, on a rotating basis, to submit at least five questions, striking quotations, or personal reflections relating to the assigned readings for the following week, in order to aid in making our seminar sessions as lively as possible. Student questions, reflections, etc. should be e-mailed to the professor no later than the Sunday evening before the Wednesday seminar session, and he will then compile the questions and e-mail them to all seminar participants. Each student will have the opportunity to contribute three such sets of questions to the seminar, and this will be 10% of each student's overall grade in the seminar.

The remaining 30% of each student's grade will be based upon the student's involvement and participation in the weekly seminar discussions. Again, I stress that reading the assigned materials

carefully and thoughtfully--well in advance of the seminar sessions, NOT at the last minute--will be essential for the best-quality seminar discussions. The point of the student questions and seminar discussions is not to be "right" about a topic but to reflect upon and seriously engage the issues that the assigned readings and topics may raise.

READING ASSIGNMENTS:

Preliminary Note: The instructor reserves the right to modify or reduce the assigned readings indicated below, as necessary. I strongly advise students to begin reading the next week's selections immediately after each Wednesday seminar session. Reading actively, raising questions, and completing all the assigned reading before the scheduled seminar meetings will have a major impact on student success and the success of the seminar. When reading the short selections, always be alert for (1) the core ideas that you find most striking or illuminating and (2) the ideas that you may disagree with or find puzzling or problematic. When reading more lengthy selections from the biographical books, try to allow sufficient concentrated time at a single sitting that you can really get into the reading and reflect upon it, without major distractions.

Week One--Wednesday, January 19 Course Introduction, Requirements, and Approaches

In addition to introducing the important topics to be discussed in the course and considering some of the limitations of the approaches we shall be using, a key goal of the first seminar session will be better getting to know each other, our interests, and backgrounds. If time permits, I shall also begin to discuss possible topics for the student research papers that will be such an important component for the course.

Week Two--Wednesday, January 26 Religious Experience, Leadership, and Prophetic Motivation

Readings to be completed BEFORE the Seminar Session for Week 2:

- William James, "Religion and Neurology" in his The Varieties of Religious Experience (orig. 1903), pp. 23-41.
- Anthony F. C. Wallace, "Revitalization Movements," in American Anthropologist 38 (April 1956): 264-281.
- Lawrence Foster, "The Psychology of Religious Genius: Joseph Smith and the Origin of New Religious Movements," in Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought 26 (Winter 1993): 1-22.
- Wilson Van Dusen, "Going Within," in his The Presence of Other Worlds: The Psychological/Spiritual Findings of Emmanuel Swedenborg (1974), pp. 19-34.
- Harvey Mindess, "Introduction: The True Believer in Psychology," in his Makers of Psychology: The Personal Factor (1988), pp. 11-17.

Week Three--Wednesday, February 2

Muhammad and Islam #1--Pre-Islamic Arabia and Muhammad's Experiences in Mecca

Readings to be completed BEFORE the Seminar Session for Week 3:

- Rafiq Zakaria, "The Life of Muhammad: A Chronological Survey," in his Muhammad and the Quran (1991), pp. 401-416.
- Daniel C. Peterson, Muhammad: Prophet of God (2007), pp. 1-76.
- Reza Aslan, No god but God: The Origin, Evolution, and Future of Islam (2006), pp. 1-49.

Week Four--Wednesday, February 9

Muhammad and Islam #2--The Qur'an, Muhammad in Medina, and the Battles with Mecca

Readings to be completed BEFORE the Seminar Session for Week 4:

- Aslan, No god but God, pp. 50-106.
- Peterson, Muhammad, pp. 77-120.
- Zakaria, "Wars and Encounters, in Muhammad and the Quran," pp. 22-42.

[Documents for Discussion in Class--Zakaria, "Quranic Verses: Summaries of Chapters and Selected Verses," Surahs 1 and 2, pp. 93-109.]

Week Five--Wednesday, February 16

Muhammad and Islam #3--Outside Speaker + Contested Issues and Muhammad's Legacy

Readings to be completed BEFORE the Seminar Session for Week 5:

- Peterson, Muhammad, pp. 121-180.
- Zakaria, "The Prophet's Mission," pp. 3-23, and "Muhammad's Marriages," pp. 43-60, in his Muhammad and the Quran.
- Montgomery Watt, "Assessment," in his Muhammad: Prophet and Statesman (1961), pp. 229-240.
- Omed Safi, "The 'Muhammad Problem,'" in his Memories of Muhammad: Why the Prophet Matters (2009), pp. 1-17 (first part of chapter only).

Week Six--Wednesday, February 23

Joseph Smith and Mormonism #1--Joseph Smith and Mormon Development Before Nauvoo:

Readings to be completed BEFORE the Seminar Session for Week 6:

- Richard N. Ostling and Joan K. Ostling, "Beginnings: A Very American Gospel," in their Mormon America: The Power and the Promise (1999), pp. 20-37.
- Fawn M. Brodie, Preface and Chapters 1 and 2, in her No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith, The Mormon Prophet, second edition, revised and enlarged (1971), pp. vii-ix, 1-31.
- Richard Lyman Bushman, Chapter 2, "The First Visions: 1816-27," Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling (2005), pp. 30-56.
- Linda King Newell and Valeen Tippetts Avery, Mormon Enigma (1994), Introduction and pp. 1-94.

Week Seven--Wednesday, March 2

Joseph Smith's Early Visionary Experiences and the Origin of the Book of Mormon:

Readings to be completed BEFORE the Seminar Session for Week 7:

On Joseph Smith's motivation and early visionary experiences:

- Mario S. DePillis, "The Quest for Authority and the Rise of Mormonism," Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought 1 (Spring 1966): 68-88.
- Lawrence Foster, "The Psychology of Prophetic Charisma: New Approaches to Understanding Joseph Smith and the Development of Charismatic Leadership," Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought, 36 (Winter 2003): 1-16.

[Documents for Discussion in Class--Dean C. Jessee, "Early Accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision," BYU Studies 9 (Spring 1969): 275-294.]

On the Book of Mormon:

- Scott C. Dunn, "Spirit Writing: Another Look at the Book of Mormon," Sunstone, June 1985, pp.18-26.
- Richard N. Ostling and Joan K. Ostling, "The Gold Bible," in their Mormon America: The Power and the Promise (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1999), 259-277.
- Grant H. Palmer, "Authorship of the Book of Mormon," in his An Insider's View of Mormon Origins (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002), 39-67.

Week Eight--Wednesday, March 9

Joseph Smith and Mormonism #3--

Mormon Nauvoo, Polygamy, and Joseph Smith's Lengthened Shadow:

Readings to be completed BEFORE the Seminar Session for Week 8:

- Lawrence Foster, "A New and Everlasting Covenant of Marriage: Joseph Smith and the Origin of Mormon Polygamy, 1831-1844," in his Religion and Sexuality: The Shakers, the Mormons, and the Oneida Community (1981), pp. 123-180.
- Linda King Newell and Valeen Tippetts Avery, Mormon Enigma (1994), pp. 95-198.
- Richard N. Ostling and Joan K. Ostling, "Almost Mainstream," in their Mormon America: The Power and the Promise (1999), pp. 94-112.

Week Nine--Wednesday, March 16

Jesus of Nazareth and Early Christianity #1--Introduction, Context, and Sources

Readings to be completed BEFORE the Seminar Session for Week 9:

- Craig Evans, "Cramped Starting Points and Overly Strict Critical Methods: The Question of Authenticity," in his Fabricating Jesus: How Modern Scholars Distort the Gospels (2006): 34-51.
- E. P. Sanders, "Two Contexts" in his The Historical Figure of Jesus (1993), pp. 78-96.
- Bart D. Ehrman, Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium (1999), Preface and pp. 3-101.

[Primary References: Core Primary Sources on Jesus from the New Testament:

The Three Synoptic Gospels:

- (1) "The Gospel of Mark" in J. B. Phillips, translator, The New Testament in Modern English (1960), pp. 68-111.
- (2) "The Gospel of Matthew," in Phillips, New Testament in Modern English, pp. 3-67.
- (3) "The Gospel of Luke," in Phillips, New Testament in Modern English, pp. 112-185.

The "Q" Source Reconstructed from Matthew and Luke:

- John H. Kloppenborg, et al, "The Sayings Gospel Q" in Q Thomas Reader (1990), pp. 35-74.
- (4) "The Gospel of John," in The Jerusalem Bible: Reader's Edition (1968)]

Week Ten--March 21-25--

NO CLASSES--GEORGIA TECH SPRING BREAK--

Read Ahead or Focus on Research Papers!

Week Eleven--Wednesday, March 30
Jesus of Nazareth and Early Christianity #2--
Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels and in the Gospel of John

Readings to be completed BEFORE the Seminar Session for Week 11:

- E. P. Sanders, "An Outline of Jesus' Life," in his The Historical Figure of Jesus," pp. 10-14.
- Marcus Borg, "The Big Picture: The Synoptic Portrait of Jesus," in his Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary (2006), pp. 137-164.
- Geza Vermes, "John: The Odd Man Out among the Evangelists," in his The Changing Faces of Jesus (2000), pp. 7-23.
- Ehrman, Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium, pp. 103-162.

Week Twelve--Wednesday, April 6
NO SEMINAR SESSION--WORK ON RESEARCH PAPER!

Week Thirteen--Wednesday, April 13
NO SEMINAR SESSION--WORK ON RESEARCH PAPER!

Week Fourteen--Wednesday, April 20
NO SEMINAR SESSION--WORK ON RESEARCH PAPER!

RESEARCH PAPERS DUE--Friday, April 23

Week Fifteen--Wednesday, April 27
Jesus of Nazareth and Early Christianity #3: Contested Issues, Jesus' Death, and His Impact

Readings to be completed BEFORE the Seminar Session on Week 15:

- Bart Ehrman, Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium, pp. 163-245.
- E.P. Sanders, The Historical Figure of Jesus--Students will help decide which of the following topics to read about and discuss: "Miracles," pp. 132-168, "The Coming of the Kingdom," pp. 165-195, "Jesus' View of his Role in God's Plan," pp. 238-248, "Jesus' Last Week," pp. 249-275, and "Epilogue: The Resurrection," pp. 276-281.