

RELIGIOUS AUTOBIOGRAPHY

REL 3350; Fall 2009

Professor Michael Stoltzfus

Office: 112 Ashley Hall

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Course Description

In this course we will mine four of the world's great religious traditions (Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, and Judaism) through the autobiographical writings of influential practitioners. We will investigate contemporary Buddhist practice through the life and writings of Chan Khong. Chan Khong teaches us how to link compassion, nonviolence, and social work in war-torn Vietnam. We will explore Islamic spirituality via the fascinating autobiography of Malcolm X as told by Alex Haley. Particular attention will be given to Malcolm's remarkable religious journey, his critique of Christianity, and his religious philosophy of social transformation and eventual break from the Nation of Islam. We will read the autobiography of Dorothy Day, a twentieth-century North American Christian, who co-founded the Catholic Worker Movement and spent her adult life living and working with homeless people in New York City. We will read Victor Frankl's shocking personal account of the Nazi death camp horrors, his perseverance against the odds, and his remarkable ability to maintain meaning in the midst of brutality. We will begin the class by reading Ishmael Beah's harrowing personal account of being a boy soldier in Sierra Leone. These four engaging religious traditions and fascinating individual lives will be explored through the medium of the written word, movies, class discussion, minimal lecturing, and student presentations. This class will immerse students in inter-religious dialogue and the relevance of religion to living a fulfilling life.

Course Outcomes

1. You will learn basic themes in Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, and Judaism
2. You will discover the historical and cultural contexts of these world religions and individual spiritual journeys.
3. You will think critically about religion and what it means to be religious.
4. You will link religion and spiritual awakening with important issues in cultural development and social transformation.
5. You will investigate diversity and pluralism in the field of religion.
6. You will compare and contrast the spiritual journeys and practical philosophies of five important twentieth-century figures.

Special Services Information: Students requesting classroom accommodations or modifications due to a documented disability must contact the Access Office for Students with Disabilities located in the Farber Hall. The phone numbers are 245-2498 (V/VP) and 219-1348 (TTY).

Cell Phone Policy: Cell phones and other wireless distraction devices should be neither seen nor heard in the classroom setting. If I see or hear a cell phone during official class hours, then I maintain the option of confiscating the phone for a twenty-four hour period. Confiscated phones may be picked up in Ashley Hall room 109 (via departmental secretary) at the appropriate time. Please keep cell phones removed from the classroom.

Texts

1. *The Long Loneliness: The Autobiography of the Legendary Catholic Social Activist.* Dorothy Day
2. *Learning True Love,* Chan Khong
3. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* as told by Alex Haley
4. *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier,* Ishmael Beah
5. *Man's Search for Meaning,* Victor Frankl

Course Requirements and Grading

1. Class attendance, participation, and preparation (25% of course grade). If you attend class having read your assignment with your reading journal on hand and participate in class discussions, then you will do well for this portion of your grade. You are expected to be punctual, attentive, courteous, and involved. This class meets only once a week so no unexcused absences are permitted. For each additional absence two percentage points will be subtracted from your final grade.
2. Weekly Reading Journal (40% of course grade). Each week you are required to keep a two page (typed, double spaced) reading journal in which you reflect on the narratives empathetically, critically, and personally.

I am looking for four things in each journal entry:

- a. You should begin each paper with **two questions** arising from the readings that you would like the class to address.
- b. Empathic reading: Try to understand the author's experience as the author understands it. The virtues of empathy are cultivated by expressing an affinity for the other, an inclination to harmonize our thoughts, feelings, emotions, and desires with theirs, and to interpret the world through their conceptual categories and religious perspectives.
- c. Critical reading: A critical reading of another person's autobiographical writings does not mean negative. Rather, you should articulate what you find to be the strengths and weaknesses evident the reading for that week. What do you like and dislike? Why?
- d. Personal reading: How might the readings be relevant for your own life and journey and/or to relevant contemporary issues? Highlight specific passages that you find to be particularly relevant.

Be prepared to share parts of your journal with the class. The journals will be turned into the professor at the end of class each Tuesday. Journals are due starting on week two and ending on week twelve. They will be evaluated on a five point scale.

3. Pop quizzes (25% of course grade). Each Tuesday there will be a short quiz that covers the reading assignment for that week. These quizzes will be given at the beginning of class. Students who are late to class or miss class may not make up these quizzes.
4. Final Class Presentation (10% of course grade). During the last two weeks of the term all students will be giving an oral presentation. Students may select one of the following issues/questions to focus their presentation:
 - a. Select three of the figures studied in this class and demonstrate how their approach to religious life and practice is similar to or different from your own religious understanding. Do these figures demonstrate that multiple religious traditions can produce wonderful human beings from whom we might learn and grow?
 - b. What are the five most important things you learned about religion in this class? How has your mind changed about religion (if at all)? Incorporate themes and examples from multiple religious traditions and life stories.
 - c. Select one relevant contemporary issue or topic and articulate how you think three of the class figures would respond to the chosen theme. What religious reasons would motivate their thinking? What practical responses might they recommend?
 - d. If you have developed a special affinity for a particular figure/tradition, then you may use that affinity to focus your presentation. Why do you like the figure/tradition so much? What did you learn from the figure/tradition? What can you teach the class about the figure/tradition that we haven't already discussed?
 - e. You may also develop your own theme or topic for the oral presentation by discussing it with the professor.

Your oral presentation should be fifteen minutes to be followed by ten minutes of questions and discussion.

Course Schedule

Week 1. Introduction to Course

Week 2. Chan Khong and Mahayana Buddhism

Read: Khong, forward, introduction & pp. 2-92.

Week 3. Chan Khong and Mahayana Buddhism

Read: Khong, pp. 93-193.

Week 4. Chan Khong and Mahayana Buddhism

Read: Khong, 194-300

Week 5. Malcolm X and Islam

Read: Haley, 3-124

Week 6. Malcolm X and Islam

Read: Haley, 125-270

Week 7. Malcolm X and Islam

Read: Haley, 271-440

Week 8. Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker Movement

Read: Day, 1-132.

Week 9. Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker Movement

Read: Day, 132-286.

Week 10. Victor Frankl and Judaism

Read: Frankl, 9-115.

Week 11. Victor Frankl and Judaism

Read: Frankl, 119-179.

Week 12. Ishmael Beah and children at war

Read: Beah, pp. 1-99 & 210-226.

Week 13. Ishmael Beah and children at war

Read: Beah, pp. 100-218.

Week 14. Student Presentations

Week 15. Student Presentations