

World Religions: REL 2020, Fall 2009
Professor Michael Stoltzfus
Office: Ashley Hall, Room 112
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Course Description

This course will introduce students to central themes, beliefs, and practices in the religious traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism, Daoism, Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. Particular focus will be placed on how these traditions developed in their distinctive historical and cultural contexts. Some of the central questions that inform the content of the class include the following: What does it mean to be religious? What is considered sacred/holy? What is the relationship between religion and human nature? What is the link between religion and violence or religion and non-violence? How are religion, society, and nature inter-related? How should we respond to the multiplicity and plurality of religious belief and practice? These and other questions will be addressed through lectures, class discussions, films, and primary and secondary texts.

Course Outcomes

1. You will learn basic themes, beliefs, and practices in world religions.
2. You will investigate the historical and cultural foundations of the world religions.
3. You will think critically about religious belief and practice.
4. You will note similarities and differences among the religions studied.
5. You will acknowledge pluralism in the field of religion.

All of the outcomes mentioned above directly relate to departmental educational outcomes 1, 2, 3 & 4 and to VSU general education outcomes 2, 3, 4, 6, 7 & 8.

Departmental Outcomes

1. To encourage an understanding of the world's religious traditions and their influence on values, norms, and public policies.
2. To develop students' critical and analytical skills and their abilities to articulate clearly an attention to multiple religious perspectives.
3. To enable students to challenge their own ideas and to develop self-understanding in the context of diverse ideas that inform contemporary controversies and social conflict.
4. To enable students to engage in independent research, to increase their sense of problem and to communicate their understanding of the issues researched and developed in the context of current theories and research methods in the discipline.

Valdosta State University General Education Outcomes

1. Students will demonstrate understanding of the society of the United States and its ideals.
2. Students will demonstrate cross-cultural perspectives and knowledge of other societies.

3. Students will use computer and information technology when appropriate.
4. Students will express themselves clearly, logically, and precisely in writing and in speaking, and they will demonstrate competence in reading and listening.
5. Students will demonstrate knowledge of scientific and mathematical principles and proficiency in laboratory practices.
6. Students will demonstrate knowledge of diverse cultural heritages in the arts, the humanities, and the social sciences.
7. Students will demonstrate the ability to analyze, to evaluate, and to make inferences from oral, written, and visual materials.
8. Students will demonstrate knowledge of principles of ethics and their employment in the analysis and resolution of moral problems.

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.

Required Texts

1. Darrell Fasching & Dell Dechant. *Comparative Religious Ethics: A Narrative Approach*.
2. Khaled Hosseini. *The Kite Runner*.
3. Lao Tsu. *Tao Te Ching*
4. Richard Attenborough. *The Words of Gandhi*
5. Thich Nhat Hanh. *The Heart of Understanding*.

Course Requirements and Grading

1. **Class attendance, participation, and preparation** (10% of course grade). You are expected to attend class and participate in class discussions. You are permitted one unexcused absence in this course. For each additional unexcused absence two percentage points will be subtracted from your final grade. You are expected to be punctual, attentive, courteous, and involved.
2. **Twelve short reflection papers responding to class readings and assignments** (20% of course grade). No papers should exceed one double spaced typed page in twelve point font. Questions to focus reflection papers are listed on the syllabus on the weeks that papers are required. Reflection papers will be turned in twice during the course. The first seven are due on **September 30th** and the final five are due on **December 2nd**.
3. **Pop quizzes** (20% of course grade). Weekly reading assignments should be completed prior to coming to class each Wednesday. Each week there is the possibility of a short quiz (expect no fewer than eight) that covers the assigned

reading material for that week. These pop quizzes will be given at the beginning of class on random Wednesdays with no prior notification to students. Students who are late to class or miss class may not make up these quizzes.

4. **In-class mid-term exam** (20% of course grade). The in-class mid-term exam will be given on **Monday, October 5th**.
5. **Take-home final Essay** (20% of course grade). The final essay assignment will be passed out on October 28th and is due on December 2nd at the beginning of class. Five reflection papers are also due.
6. **Student Presentations** (10% of course grade). During the last several weeks of class students will be giving oral presentations to the class. The content of the presentations will coordinate with your final essay assignment.

The grading scale is as follows: 90% to 100% = A; 80% to 89% = B; 70% to 79% = C; 60% to 69% = D; 59% and below = F

Course Schedule

Week 1. Introduction to Religious Traditions

Read: 3-41.

Questions: From your own perspective, what is the difference between being religious and being spiritual? What is the difference between the “the sacred” and “the holy” from the perspective of chapter one?

Week 2. Religions, Violence and Ethics

Read: 42-102.

Questions: For Socrates, why is doubt a good thing? How are sacred narratives and techno-bureaucratic rationality linked with violence?

Week 3. Hinduism

Read: 104-133; Gandhi, 7-25.

Questions: What are *karma*, *samsara*, *dharma* and *yoga* in the Hindu tradition? How are these terms related to one another?

Week 4. Hinduism and Gandhi

Read: Gandhi, 29-103.

Questions: How does Gandhi connect spirituality with nonviolence? Articulate one agreement and one disagreement that you have with Gandhi’s worldview.

Week 5. Buddhism

Read: 135-163.

Question: What is the main point of the Buddha’s teaching and why is it so important? Apply two elements of the eight-fold path to your own experience.

Week 6. Buddhism and Thich Nhat Hanh

Read: Hanh, entire text

Question: How are the Buddhist notions of no separate self, interconnectedness, impermanence and compassion related to each other? Reflect on Thich Nhat Hanh’s poem (157-58).

Week 7. Taoism

Read: *Tao Te Ching*, entire text

Questions: Why are harmony and humility such important virtues in Taoism?

Select one of your favorite chapters from the text and articulate its meaning to the best of your understanding.

Week 8. Judaism

Read: 165-195;

Questions: What does the notion of covenant mean for Jewish people? How do the author's connect the stories of Abraham and Job with the theme of audacity?

In-class midterm exam on Monday, October 5th.

Week 9. Judaism and Heschel

Read: 165-195.

Questions: Reflect on Heschel's telegram to Kennedy (185). What does Heschel mean when he writes: "In a free society, some are guilty but all are responsible" (188)?

Week 10. Christianity

Read: 197-225; Hosseini, 1-124.

Questions: According to King, what is involved in "the way of the cross?" Do you agree or disagree with King?

Week 11. Islam

Read: 227-263; Hosseini, 125-242.

Questions: How is Islam similar to yet different from Judaism? What is Islam's view of sin and human nature?

Week 12. Islam

Read: Hosseini, 243-371.

Questions: What are the Islamic religious themes implicit in Rahim Khan's quote: "Come. There is a way to be good again (192)?" What have you learned about the children of Afghanistan through reading this novel?

Week 13. World Religions in Dialogue: Students Presentations

Week 14: World Religions in Dialogue: Student Presentations

Week 15: World Religions in Dialogue: Student Presentations

Week 16: World Religions in Dialogue: Student Presentations