

Religious Studies 110

INTRODUCTION TO RELIGIOUS STUDIES

Spring, 2009: Tuesday and Thursday, 2:00 p.m. - 3:15 p.m.

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This course is an introduction to the beliefs and spiritual practices of the world's religions. Following a brief discussion of various scholarly approaches to the subject, we focus on the following specific traditions: Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Judaism, Islam, and the primal religion of the American Plains Indians. Christianity is not included in this list because it is assumed that the majority of students in the class will be from Christian backgrounds, and the emphasis is therefore placed on *non*-Christian faiths so that something new can be learned. On the other hand, Christian doctrines and practices will be kept close at hand for comparison, and it is hoped that by frequent cross-reference students will gain a deeper understanding of this religion as well.

The instructor's approach is philosophical and theological rather than historical. Students will acquire a wealth of specific information about the world's religious traditions and their developments over time. But more importantly they will be encouraged to ponder some of the most fundamental questions of life: Who or what is God? How did the world get started? What is wrong with human beings and how can it be fixed? Where do we go when we die? Assuming that Christ was right when he said, "By their fruits ye shall know them" (Matthew 7:20) and that the fruit of a true religion is sanctity or spiritual wholeness, the course will also include an exploration of the lives and teachings of four twentieth-century figures regarded by their respective traditions as saints; in them one sees embodied the deepest meaning of religion.

Readings:

Three texts are required: James S. Cutsinger, *Paths of Return*, the instructor's lectures for the course, which are available on his website under "Teaching" (see Syllabi, then RELG 110); *The World's Wisdom: Sacred Texts of the World's Religions*, edited by Philip Novak, which can be purchased at the South Carolina Bookstore (801 Main Street); and *A Book of Saints*, which is posted on the course Blackboard site.

Requirements:

1. *Reading*. Thorough and attentive reading is essential. This is an introductory course, which means that there are no prerequisites and that every effort will be made to explain the subject matter as simply and straightforwardly as possible; on the other hand, the teachings of the world's religions are far from simplistic, and studying—not just skimming—the assigned material is crucial for success.

2. *Attendance*, both prompt and regular. A sign-up sheet will be circulated at the start of each class to record daily attendance; two unexcused absences are permitted, but a penalty of one letter grade is imposed for each additional unexcused absence. When quizzes (see below) are given, they will be administered immediately at the start of class, and tardiness can therefore be an added disaster for grades; it is in any case a discourtesy to one's fellow students to be late, so please come on time or do not come at all.

3. *Participation*. Frequent questions and comments are strongly encouraged. During the first part of each class, the instructor will highlight certain points in *Paths of Return* and introduce additional material, but there will always be plenty of time for discussion. Although there is no grade as such for class participation, constructive contributions on a regular basis can help to raise a student's final course grade by as much as a full letter.

4. *Quizzes and examinations*. There will be six unannounced quizzes (worth 30% of the final course grade), based on the assigned reading in *Paths of Return* and occasional videos. There will also be two essay examinations: a midterm (30%) and a final (40%); the exams presuppose familiarity with *Paths* and material presented in class, but they also test one's knowledge of *The World's Wisdom* and *A Book of Saints*.

Please note: Make-ups for missed quizzes or examinations will *not* be permitted except for medical or other essential reasons and only then if one *promptly* presents a written excuse from a doctor or other responsible authority.

Schedule:

Introduction: *Saints*, pp. 4-15

Jan. 13, No reading assignment; Jan. 15, *Paths 1*; Jan. 20, *Paths 2*

South Asian Religion: *Wisdom*, pp. 1-77; *Saints*, pp. 16-53

Jan. 22, *Paths 3*; Jan. 27, *Paths 4*; Jan. 29, *Paths 5*; Feb. 3, *Paths 6*;
Feb. 5, Video on Hinduism; Feb. 10, Open Discussion

East Asian Religion: *Wisdom*, pp. 77-174; *Saints*, pp. 54-92

Feb. 12, *Paths 7*; Feb. 17, *Paths 8*; Feb. 19, *Paths 9*; Feb. 24, *Paths 10*;
Feb. 26, Video on Buddhism

Mar. 3, Open Discussion and Review for Midterm; Mar. 5, Midterm Exam

Mar. 10-12, Spring Break

Western Religion: *Wisdom*, pp. 175-226; 281-332; *Saints*, pp. 93-114

Mar. 17, *Paths 11*; Mar. 19, *Paths 12*; Mar. 24, *Paths 13*; Mar. 26, *Paths 14*;
Mar. 31, Video on Islam; Apr. 2, Open Discussion

Primal Religion: *Wisdom*, pp. 333-379; *Saints*, pp. 115-132

Apr. 7, *Paths 15*; Apr. 9, *Paths 16*; Apr. 14, *Paths 17*; Apr. 16, Video on Primal
Religion

Apr. 21, *Paths 18*; Apr. 23, Open Discussion and Review for Final

May 1, Final Examination (9:00 a.m.)

Office Hours:

Tuesdays and Thursdays, 9:30 – 10:30 a.m., or by appointment.