

SACRED TEXTS

Professor James S. Cutsinger

This seminar will consist in a close and careful reading of five of the world's most important sacred texts: the Book of Job, the *Tao Teh Ching*, the *Koran* (selections), the *Bhagavad Gita*, and the Gospel of John. The course is not a survey. The goal instead is to plunge deeply into these seminal masterpieces in order to come to grips with their continuing importance for human life today. In a sense, the books are the real teachers in this class. The primary aim of the instructor is to assist students in the fine art of attentive reading and to promote a disciplined exploration of a few of the world's most enduring ideas.

Method:

The seminar will be conducted as a Socratic discussion. Each class begins with a question about the reading for the day, and it is expected that students will join with the instructor and each other in a shared conversational inquiry. A premium will be placed on precision, explanation, and defense. Students will be held doubly accountable: for courteously listening to the contributions of others and for patiently justifying their own observations.

While it is sometimes thought that Socratic conversation is less rigorous than a more didactic and professorial style, its rigor is simply of another kind. In the serious cross-examination of a great work, the course of conversation is often unpredictable; it is certainly less linear than in the conventional classroom. But the intellectual commitment required, the daily vigilance, demands a preparation and yields a mental fitness not promoted by other forms of learning. These advantages will be pressed to the full in this course.

Requirements:

1. *Reading.* Students should read very closely and carefully. Familiarity with the assigned texts is critical for good discussion; underlining important words and passages and maintaining a "dialogue" with the authors through copious marginal comments are helpful means to this end.
2. *Attendance,* both prompt and regular. There will be a penalty of one letter grade per absence for unexcused absences in excess of two. Attendance means punctuality; tardy arrivals and seminars are a disastrous mix.
3. *Constructive participation.* For obvious reasons, this course is not for students who prefer an education they can simply ingest as the passive takers of notes. It is for those who enjoy the acts of thinking and reflection and argument. Frequent contributions to class discussion are not merely desirable. They are essential.
4. *Essays.* Students will write three essays of 5-6 pages each. Neither book-reports nor research-papers, these essays should be viewed instead as continuing conversations in which their authors wrestle in writing with the ideas opened up by at least three of the books. Professor Cutsinger's *Breviary of English Usage*, which can be found on his web-site under "Teaching", will be used in his grading and commentary.
5. *Final Examination.* During the scheduled final examination period for this course, each student will meet with the instructor for a short oral examination. Students are asked to prepare for this examination by writing a self-assessment of their work (2-3 pages). Submitted by class-time on Tuesday, April 27, these assessments must take into consideration the instructor's comments on papers and class-contributions, and they should contain the recommendation of a specific grade for the course. This grade will be based on the student's two best essays (1/3 of the course grade each) and class-participation (1/3). Copies of the two essays the student wishes to have considered for this purpose, containing the instructor's comments, should be re-submitted at this time.

Jan. 13	Introduction	Jan. 15	Job 1-9
Jan. 20	Job 10-17	Jan. 22	Job 18-26
Jan. 27	Job 27-34	Jan. 29	Job 35-42
Feb. 3	<i>Tao</i> 1-16	Feb. 5	<i>Tao</i> 17-32
Feb. 10	<i>Tao</i> 33-48	Feb. 12	<i>Tao</i> 49-64
Feb. 17	<i>Tao</i> 65-81	Feb. 19	Open Discussion
Feb. 24	<i>Koran</i> *	Feb. 26	<i>Koran</i>
Mar. 2	<i>Koran</i>	Mar. 4	<i>Koran</i>
Mar. 9	Spring Break	Mar. 11	Spring Break
Mar. 16	<i>Koran</i>	Mar. 18	<i>Gita</i> 1-3
Mar. 23	<i>Gita</i> 4-6	Mar. 25	<i>Gita</i> 7-10
Mar. 30	<i>Gita</i> 11-14	Apr. 1	<i>Gita</i> 15-18
Apr. 6	Open Discussion	Apr. 8	John 1-4
Apr. 13	John 5-7	Apr. 15	John 8-11
Apr. 20	John 12-16	Apr. 22	John 17-21
Apr. 27	Conclusion		

* Assigned readings from the *Koran* are listed on the following page.

Readings from the Koran

February 24

III: 1-85 The House of 'Imran
LIX The Mustering
LXXVI Man
XCVI The Blood Clot
XCVII Power

February 26

I The Opening
XIII Thunder
XV *El-Hijr*
LIII The Star
C The Chargers
CXII Sincere Religion

March 2

V The Table
LXXII The Jinn
LXXXIII The Stinters
CXIII Daybreak

March 4

XXVII The Ant
XXX The Greeks
LV The All-Merciful
LXXXI The Darkening
CXIV Men

March 16

XXXVIII *Sad*
XLVII Muhammad
LVI The Terror
LVII Iron
LXXVIII The Tidings