

Introduction to Religions
(REL 130)

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Office hours: TR 9:00-10:00, 1:00-2:00; or by appointment

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MW 10:00-11:30
Olin 135

Description

This course is an introduction to world religions. It surveys the historical development of the beliefs and practices of both eastern and western traditions, and the influences that these traditions have had on one another. In addition, it examines the social construction of individual belief and communities of faith. Throughout the semester we will try to get at the idea of religion by examining religions, and we will come to a new understanding of particular religions by keeping the idea of religion in mind. The goal of the course, then, is to provide students with a general knowledge of the major religious traditions and a comparative framework for understanding the social function of religion.

Requirements

On a daily basis, you should do the following: 1.) complete the assigned readings, think about them, and cobble together an oral response to the focus question; 2.) bring your primary source reader (Smart and Hecht) to class, which means attendance is required; and 3.) contribute to class discussion. Class will proceed through combination of lecture and discussion. We will discuss, debate and argue about—in a civil manner—the various topics and ideas covered in the schedule of classes. In order to facilitate this kind of Socratic learning, which I plan on benefiting from also, you must read, think and engage in informed discussion.

Because your participation is so essential for discussion and the learning process, any unexcused absences will negatively affect the class and your grade. I can overlook two “cuts,” but after that each absence will deduct two percentage points from your final grade. Entering class late or leaving early communicates a disregard for the subject, your classmates and me—all things you no doubt want to avoid. Finally, I may on occasion ask you to write brief responses to one of the readings during class. This is not just an exercise; rather, it’s a way to generate discussion and prepare for the essay papers and exams.

Grading

Three exams	60%	(3 x 20%)
Two papers	30%	(2 x 15%)
Participation	10%	

The **three exams** will be a combination of objective questions and short essays. Contact me in advance if you know that you are unable to make a scheduled exam time. Make-up exams will only be given to those with a valid and compelling excuse, which I reserve the right to determine. **Two interpretive papers** will be assigned. One will focus on material in class; the other will be a religion in the news assignment. **Class participation** will be based on your willingness to

voice your opinions, questions and ideas—in short, to make the class a lively and meaningful experience. You will also be expected to contribute to small group discussions and will be called on from time to time throughout the semester. Failure to complete any of the graded course assignments will result in an F for the assignment and lowered overall grade penalty.

Academic Integrity Policy

I will observe DePauw's policy on academic integrity (i.e., cheating and plagiarism), as outlined in the *Student Handbook*. We will review this issue at the beginning of the class, but I encourage you to read the policy for yourself.

Required Texts

- Berger, Peter L. *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Anchor Books)
Nielsen, Jr., Niels C., et al. *Religions of the World* (Bedford)
Smart, Ninian and Richard D. Hecht. *Sacred Texts of the World: A Universal Anthology* (Crossroad)

Schedule of Classes and Assignments

8/26 Introduction

8/31 Defining religion and the “six dimensions”
The Nature of Religious Experience
Nielsen, 1-17
Smart and Hecht, xi-xv

Focus question: How can a definition of religion affect the study of religion?

9/2 Constructing and maintaining religious worlds
Berger, 3-51

Focus question: What is a religious world and how is it constructed?

9/7 Religious knowledge and religious experience
Video clip: “Life in a Fundamentalist Baptist Church”
Philip Kapleau’s “The Three Pillars of Zen” (Blackboard)

Focus question: What is the linkage between socialization and experience, and why is it important for understanding religion, especially religious experience?

Hinduism

9/9 Indus valley civilization and Vedic religion
Nielsen, 83-101

Smart and Hecht, **Sacred Narrative 1,2,3**: 181-186; Ritual 1: 204-207; Institutional 1: 212-213

Focus question: What is the purpose of the gods in Vedic religion/society?

9/14 Way of life and action in classical Hinduism

Nielsen, 102-114

Smart and Hecht, Ritual 5: 211-212; **Institutional 2**: 213-216; Ethics 1: 226-228

Focus question: Why are the castes so ingrained in Hindu society, even to this day?

9/16 Upanishads: the way of knowledge

Nielsen, 115-127

Smart and Hecht, **Doctrine 1**: 192-193, **Doctrine 3,4,5**: 195-199; **Experience 3**: 223-224; Ethics 2: 228

Focus question: What is the connection between Brahman and atman?

9/21 The way of devotion and modern developments

Nielsen, 128-150

Smart and Hecht, Sacred Narrative 5: 190-192; **Doctrine 2**: 193-195; **Experience 1,2**: 218-222, 5: 225-226; Ethics 3: 229-230

Focus question: What is the message of the Bhagavadgita? Among the many changes in Hinduism in the modern period, what, if anything, has remained continuous with the past?

9/23 Video

Buddhism

9/28 The Buddha and his teachings

Nielsen, 165-171

Smart and Hecht, **Sacred Narrative 1,2,3**: 233-238; **Doctrine 1,2,3,4**: 241-244; **Experience 2,3,4**: 261-264; Ethics 4: 271-272

Focus question: Why is the Buddha's life story so important for Buddhism?

9/30 Community and ways of life

Nielsen, 171-176

Smart and Hecht, **Ritual 1,2,3,4**: 250-254; **Institutional 1,2,3**: 255-258; Ethics 1,2,3: 266-271, Ethics 6: 273-274

Focus question: What is the connection between thought, action (behavior) and community?

- 10/5 Theravada and Mahayana
Nielsen, 177-193
Smart and Hecht, Sacred Narrative 4: 239-241; Doctrine 5,6: 245-247; Experience 1:
259-261; **Ethics 1,2,3,4,5,6:** 266-274

Focus question: What is the social basis of this division in Buddhism?

- 10/7 Cultural variations and modern developments
Nielsen, 194-219
Smart and Hecht, Doctrine 7: 247-250; Experience 5,6,7: 264-266

Focus question: What accounts for the popularity of Buddhism in the West?

- 10/12 1st Exam

Judaism

- 10/14 The Hebrew people and the biblical tradition
Nielsen, 283-307
Smart and Hecht, **Sacred Narrative 1,2,3,4,5,6,7:** 49-58; Doctrine 1: 59; **Experience**
1,2: 73-5, Experience 4: 79-80; Ethics 1: 84-85, Ethics 4: 87-88

Focus question: What is the significance of the various covenants between God and the people of Israel? Why, according to the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament), do bad things happen to the Israelite people?

- 10/19, Fall Break
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- 10/26 Hellenism and the Rabbinic tradition
Nielsen, 308-318
Smart and Hecht, Sacred Narrative 1: 50-51; **Doctrine 2:** 59-60; **Ritual 2:** 65-67;
Institutional 1,2: 71-72

Focus question: What historical factors led to the rise of Rabbinic Judaism?

- 10/28 Medieval and modern Judaism
Nielsen, 318-338
Moodle

Focus question: How did European modernity impact Judaism?

Christianity

11/2 Life and message of Jesus

Nielsen, 345-354

Smart and Hecht, **Sacred Narrative 1,2,3,4**: 93-98; Ritual 1: 107-108; **Experience 1**: 116-117; Ethics 1: 119-122

Focus question: Was Jesus a good Jew? What parallels can you think of between the life of the Buddha and the life of Jesus?

11/4 Church formation and controversies

Nielsen, 354-368

Smart and Hecht, **Doctrine 1,2**: 99-102; Ritual 3,4,5: 108-111; Institutional 1,2,3: 112-116; Experience 3: 118

Focus question: How have the various councils, and their determinations, contributed to Christian theology?

11/9 Christendom and the Reformation

Nielsen, 369-406

Moodle

Focus question: What is the concept of Christendom? What does it represent? How does it differ from Christianity?

11/11 Modern movements and themes

Nielsen, 407-423

Focus question: What is the connection between modernity/modernization and Christian fundamentalism in America?

11/16 2nd Exam

Islam

11/18 Muhammad and the message of the Qur'an

Nielsen, 427-446

Smart and Hecht, **Sacred Narrative 1,2,3**: 130-141; **Experience 3,4,5**: 166-172; **Doctrine 2,3,4**: 144-150; Ethics 3: 174-176

Focus question: What are the similarities between the role of Muhammad and previous monotheistic prophets? How does the narrative of monotheism in the Qur'an relate to the history of Judaism and Christianity?

- 11/23 Islamic institutions: Community, Politics, Law
Nielsen, 447-465
Smart and Hecht, **Institutional 1**: 158-159, **Institutional 2,3**: 160-164

Focus question: How does Islamic law bind the community of Muslims?

11/25 Thanksgiving Recess

- 11/30 Shi'ism and modern Islam
Nielsen, 466-491
Moodle

Focus question: Can you see any similarities between the Sunni/Shi'i dispute over authority and that of Catholics and Protestants in Christianity? Why do you think that Islam (religion) has played such an important role in the modernization of many Muslim societies?

The Process of Secularization

- 12/2 Secularization and the problems of plausibility and legitimation
Berger, 105-171

Focus question: How has secularization affected society and individuals? Why is it so hard to believe and keep religious institutions going in a secularized, pluralistic society?

- 12/7 Secular worldviews
Smart and Hecht, 381-391

Focus question: Is nationalism a modern religion? Does the fact that the dimensions can be found in secular worldviews make these worldviews the modern equivalent of religions?

12/9 Wrap-up and review

12/15 Final exam (8:30-11:30am)

A RELIGION

ITS MAJOR DIMENSIONS AND RELATIONSHIPS

1. **Doctrinal:** This dimension contains explanatory statements about the beliefs of a religion. They are organized systematically in some traditions in order to show the coherence between different and sometimes seemingly contradictory beliefs. In all cases they represent an effort to clarify and to give intellectual vigor to religious beliefs.

Examples: creeds, theologies, rules for interpreting.

2. **Ethical:** A religion's more or less systematically organized set of moral beliefs and behavioral guidelines which prescribe moral ideals for personal and social life and which proscribe or prohibit activities contrary to those ideals. These normative moral statements usually are cast in very concrete terms as evoked in the tradition's myth and ritual.

Examples: the decalogue, the Shariah, Sermon on the Mount, the Laws of Manu, the Eightfold Path.

3. **Experiential:** That dimension of religion wherein the divine or absolute is perceived as being experienced directly (in an instant or cumulatively over time). The classic examples are experiences called "mystical" and more prosaic instances are known as "inspirations."

Examples: The Enlightenment of the Buddha, sensing an answer to prayer.

4. **Mythological:** Among other things this dimension includes beliefs (usually but not always, expressed in the form of stories) about beginnings and endings, gods, culture heroes, special times, places and historical events.

Examples: creation and flood stories, stories about Zeus, Apollo, Moses, Jesus, Muhammed.

5. **Ritual/liturgical:** The highly symbolic activities of prayer, worship and other behaviors designed to reenact, to celebrate, and to bring about communications with the absolute.

Examples: festivals, recurrent rituals of prayer and worship.

6. **Social/institutional:** The forms in which religious teaching, authority, and common living are organized.

Examples: churches, synagogues, Buddhist sangha, Muslim ummah.

Interrelationships:

Beliefs

doctrines
ethics
myths

Practices

experiences
institutions
rituals