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REL 130: Introduction to Religions (W)
Fall 2008: DePauw University

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Texts:

Required:

- *Fisher, *Living Religions* (7th Edition)
- *Smith, *The World's Religions*

We will be reading the primary sources below. Please be sure to find a version that you can bring with you to class (I have provided links to online versions of many of these texts):

Bhagavad-Gita
Dhammapada: Sayings of the Buddha
Zen Speaks
The Analects
Chuang-tzu: Basic Writings
The Book of Job Proverbs
The Gospel of Thomas
The Gospel of Mark
The Koran
Hadith

Course Description:

“Whether simple or complex, all known religious beliefs display a common feature: They presuppose a classification of the real or ideal things that men conceive of into two classes—two opposite genera—that are widely designated by two distinct terms, which the words *profane* and *sacred* translate fairly well. The division of the world into two domains, one containing all that is sacred and the other all that is profane—such is the distinctive trait of religious thought. Beliefs, myths, dogmas, and legends are either representations or systems of representations that express the nature of sacred things, the virtues and powers attributed to them, their history, and their relationships with one another as well as with profane things.”

--Durkheim, *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*

In this claim, Durkheim provides something of a frame of reference for our conversation this semester. Our general task—and a large and somewhat daunting one at that—is to chart out the relationship between the sacred and profane in the context of the major religious traditions of the world. How do these realms interact? Is the relationship oppositional? Hierarchical? Dialogical? Can we move from one to the other? Can we occupy both simultaneously? How do these traditions go about designating what belongs to each realm?

This course is envisioned as an introductory survey of the major religious traditions of the world. There are, of course, any number of ways to approach this kind of survey, all of which provide unique insight into the traditions. Our approach will be primarily philosophical—meaning, we

will consider these traditions as internally coherent systems of belief, each with its own claims to truth. We will explore the relationship between these truth claims and the specific type of action, or ethics, each tradition promotes. As we look into the *particulars* of each of these traditions, we will also be viewing these traditions *comparatively*, considering the development of these traditions in terms of how they provide a response to previously established traditions.

This type of course comes with a built-in disclaimer: it is important to recognize that *no religious tradition is monolithic*; therefore, it is both impossible and irresponsible to reduce a tradition to a single text, doctrine, or interpretation. While we are moving so quickly through such vast and rich traditions, we should bear in mind that there is much, much more to explore than our short sessions will allow. It is my goal and my hope that this type of survey—by no means exhaustive—will open up windows to beliefs and traditions you may not have been exposed to before, and that, after this course, you might revisit and spend more time in some of these places.

Expectations and Requirements:

The most important expectation I have of you (which also happens to be the most basic requirement) is that you come to class prepared, with an open mind, and ready for an engaged and lively discussion. Discussion really is the most crucial component to honing and refining your own interpretations and understanding of the traditions we will be encountering—rather than passive recipients of the one “right” interpretation of each tradition, your role in this class is to be active participants in uncovering multiple meanings of the pieces we address. I expect your questions, concerns, and even confusion with the material to be our starting point for discussion. A rule of thumb in this class: Speak up often and without reserve—each one of you has something unique and worthwhile to bring to our discussion.

In addition to completing a **mid-term exam** and **final exam**, you will be asked to turn in **four essays (including plans of attack and preliminary drafting materials)**. You will **workshop** each draft in class with an assigned group before the final draft is due. It is my hope that these essays will build on one another and that they will allow you to enter more deeply into the material. You will have an opportunity in these assignments to grapple with and synthesize our readings and to pursue questions that are raised in our discussions.

You will also be asked to participate in a **Moodle discussion board** and to do a **mini-presentation** (with a group) on some aspect of religion and popular culture. **The discussion board** is an opportunity to further explore something we dealt with in class. These postings *should reflect your own* interpretations, opinions, understanding, confusion, etc. of the material. It *should not* be a summary of the material. Effective strategies might be to choose a specific passage in the text (perhaps a line that made you really stop and think) for your point of departure, or to start with a moment of confusion and/or insight you experienced while reading the material for a given unit. Because the entire class will be participating in this discussion board, you should take care to read and respond to each other’s comments in your own response to the material. In this way, our discussion will continue outside of class.

This is a “W course, therefore, you will be expected to do a number of different types of writing, both formal and informal. **Please note:** you need to earn a B- or better in the class to receive your “W”; it is possible to pass the course but not receive the “W”.

Grades will be determined **approximately** like this: participation 5%, essays (including preliminary materials) 40%, midterm 15%, final 15%, in-class workshop sessions 10%, discussion board 5%, mini-presentation 10%

A few niggling details: Don't miss class unless you have a really, really good reason. Good judgment and discretion, I trust, will help you to determine what these really, really good reasons are. **Beginning with your third absence, however, your grade will be marked down.** The rationale behind this policy is simple: the whole point of discussion is the collective aspect of it—you miss that and you miss the essence of the particular session. Also, turn your assignments in on time. It's unfair to your classmates if I grant unwarranted extensions. **Late assignments (that have not been cleared first by me) will, therefore, bring down your final grade.**

**** Please don't hesitate to come to my office hours if you have **any** questions or concerns. The door is always open.

Course Schedule:

Week 1

Aug Th 28 Intro to Class: What is religion? What does religion do?
A thumbnail sketch of Berger: "Religion and World Construction"
"Religion and World Maintenance"

over the weekend: please take the "Belief-o-Matic" quiz on "beliefnet":

http://www.beliefnet.com/story/76/story_7665_1.html

Week 2

Sept T 2 Discuss quiz questions and assumptions behind them.
Fisher, Chapter 1
essay #1 assigned
Hinduism
Th 4 Smith, 12-29, Fisher, 72-90
F 5 **Moodle post #1**

Week 3

T 9 Fisher, 91-117; *Bhagavad-Gita* [First through Ninth Teaching]
suggested link:
<http://www.wsu.edu:8080/~dee/ANCINDIA/GITA.HTM>
Th 11 *Bhagavad-Gita* [Tenth through Eighteenth Teaching]
Mini-presentation #1
F 10 **Moodle post #2**

Week 4

Buddhism
T 16 Smith, 82-127, Fisher, 134-158
workshop preliminary draft and plan of attack for essay #1
Th 18 *Dhammapada*
suggested link:
<http://www.thebigview.com/buddhism/dhammapada.html>

come to class with several sections you've read closely and want to discuss

F 19 Due: essay #1, by 5:00 in box by my office door

Week 5

Zen Buddhism

T 23 Fisher, 158-181

essay #2 assigned

Th 25 *Zen Speaks*

Mini-presentation #2

F 26 Moodle post #3

Week 6

Confucianism

T 30 Smith, 154-187, Fisher, 199-213

Oct Th 2 *Analects*

suggested link:

<http://www.4literature.net/Confucius/Analects/>

come to class with several sections you've read closely and want to discuss

F 3 Moodle post #4

Week 7

Taoism

T 7 Smith, 196-219, Fisher, 182-199

workshop preliminary draft and plan of attack for essay #2

Th 9 *Chuang-tzu: Basic Writings*

suggested link:

<http://oaks.nvg.org/ys1ra5.html>

come to class with several sections you've read closely and want to discuss

Mini-presentation #3

F 10 Due: essay #2, by 5:00 in box by my office door

Week 8

T 14 Debate: Confucius vs. Chuang-tzu

Review for exam

Th 16 Midterm exam

*****Fall Break—October 18-26*****

Week 9

Judaism

T 28 Fisher, 235-291

- Th 30 **essay #3 assigned**
 Proverbs
 suggested link:
<http://www.mechon-mamre.org/e/et/et28.htm>
- F 31 **Moodle post #6**

Week 10

- Nov T 4 Book of Job
 suggested link:
<http://www.mechon-mamre.org/e/et/et27.htm>
Mini-presentation #4
Christianity
- Th 6 Fisher, 296-372 (emphasis on 296-351)
workshop preliminary draft and plan of attack for essay #3
- F 7 **Moodle post #7**

Week 11

- M 10 Due: essay #3, by 5:00 in the box by my office door**
- T 11 The Gospel of Mark
 suggested link:
<http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/mark-kjv.html>
essay #4 assigned
- Th 13 The Gospel of Thomas
 suggested link:
<http://www.westarinstitute.org/Polebridge/Title/Complete/Thomas/thomas.html>
Mini-presentation #5

Week 12

- Islam***
- T 18 Fisher, 376-433
workshop preliminary draft and plan of attack for essay #4
- Th 20 Koran
 suggested link:
<http://etext.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/HolKora.html>
come to class with several chapters (surah) you've read closely and want to discuss
- F 21 **Moodle post #8**

Week 13

- M 24 Due: essay #4, by 5:00 in the box by my office door**
- T 25 Hadith
 suggested link:
<http://www.usc.edu/dept/MSA/fundamentals/hadithsunnah/bukhari/>
come to class with several hadith you've read closely and want to discuss
Mini-presentation #6

*****Thanksgiving—November 26-30*****

Week 14

- Dec T 2 ***New Religious Movements***
Fisher, 459-495
- Th 4 ***Secularism within a religious framework***
<http://ecumene.org/IIS/csss.htm>
<http://iishj.org/>
http://www.crvp.org/book/Series01/I-12/chapter_ix.htm
come to class ready to discuss these sites
- F 5 **Moodle post #9**

Week 15

- T 9 ***Secular humanism/atheism***
<http://www.secularhumanism.org/>
come to class with one “Dangerous Reading” you have read closely and want to discuss
<http://www.patcondell.com/>
come to class with one “Godless Comedy” episode you have watched and want to discuss
<http://www.centerforinquiry.net/>
- Th 11 ***Religion in the Twenty-First Century***
Fisher, 496-517
Before coming to class: please re-take the “Belief-o-Matic” quiz we started with this semester
Final review
- F 12 **Moodle post #10**

Final Exam: December 16th, 1:00-4:00