

REL 150: Introduction to World Religious Literature
Spring 2009: DePauw University

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Texts:

These texts can be purchased on-line or at the University Bookstore.

1. Hesse, *Siddhartha*
2. *Dhammapadda* (Shambala Pocket edition)
3. Erdoes and Ortiz, *American Indian Myths and Legends*
4. Miller, *The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder*
5. *The Upanishads*
6. *Tao Te Ching*
7. Rumi, *The Forbidden Rumi*
8. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

Description of Course:

“What, then, is the psychological significance of religious ideas and under what heading are we to classify them? The question is not at all easy to answer immediately. After rejecting a number of formulations, we will take our stand on the following one. Religious ideas are teachings and assertions about facts and conditions of external (or internal) reality which tell one something one has not discovered for oneself and which lay claim to one’s belief. Since they give us information about what is most important and interesting to us in life, they are particularly highly prized. Anyone who knows nothing of them is very ignorant; and anyone who has added them to his knowledge may consider himself much the richer.”

--Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*

In this bold claim, Freud gives us something of a point of departure for the large task we have before us this semester. We are going to take him at his word that religious ideas “give us information about what is most important and interesting to us in life.” At this point, though, things begin to get a little sticky. What makes an idea “religious” in nature? Is there a category of thinking or writing that we can determine as uniquely religious? Does an idea have to be documented or contained within “sacred scripture” for it to be considered religious? Can the spectrum of religious thinking also reflect ideas that are not bound to a particular religious tradition? That challenge and subvert religious beliefs? We’re throwing around some pretty vague terms here. Our task this semester will be to attempt to define what we mean when we call something “religious” and how literature—texts both “sacred” and “secular”—provides special access to this realm of ideas.

This course is envisioned as an introductory survey of the major religious traditions of the world, using literature as our entry point. Over the course of the semester, we will read texts representative of these traditions as well as literary works that explicitly and implicitly reference

these traditions. At the same time, we will also be thinking comparatively about these traditions, about how they connect to and diverge from one another. It is my hope that we will come to both a sharper and more complicated definition of “religious” as we explore the traditions and reverberations of the traditions in the texts we will encounter.

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. “World Religious Literature” is a subject that is so immense that it would take a lifetime—indeed more than a lifetime—to exhaust. It goes without saying (but I’ll say it anyway!) that any number of works could just as easily have been part of this syllabus. 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 of the literature we will be reading—rather than passive recipients of the one “right” interpretation of each work, 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 a **midterm** and **final exam**, you will be asked to turn in **two essays**, to participate in a **Moodle discussion group**, and to **facilitate (with a group) the discussion of one text in class**. The **essays** will involve a combination of explication and synthesis, encouraging you to engage in close textual analysis and to think comparatively about the material. The **discussion group** provides a space for you to continue to explore issues that have been raised in class with a few of your colleagues. 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 a particular text. 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. The **facilitation of discussion** will give you the opportunity to pursue a particular line of questioning, or to take up a particular set of issues, in your chosen text. *This is not a formal presentation*; you should aim to engage the class as much as possible.

Grades will be determined **approximately** like this: Moodle discussion group 10%, essays 40%, midterm exam 20% , final exam 20%, facilitation of discussion 5%, participation 5%

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:

Jan	M	26	Introduction to course; Genesis 1-3
	W	28	Genesis 4-11; Genesis 22
Feb	M	2	American Indian Myths and Legends
	W	4	American Indian Myths and Legends
	F	6	Group-led discussion #1 Moodle discussion #1
	M	9	Upanishads
	W	11	Upanishads Group-led discussion #2
	M	16	Smith 82-88, "The Man Who Woke Up" [posted on Moodle]; Dhammapada
	W	18	Dhammapada
	F	20	Group-led discussion #3 Moodle discussion #2
	M	23	<i>Tao Te Ching</i>
	W	25	<i>Tao Te Ching</i>
	F	27	Group-led discussion #4 Moodle discussion #3
Mar	M	2	Proverbs 1-15
	W	4	Proverbs 15-31
	F	6	Group-led discussion #5 essay #1 due by 5:00 on Moodle
	M	9	Koran
	W	11	Koran
	F	13	Group-led discussion #6 Moodle discussion #4
	M	16	Rumi, <i>The Forbidden Rumi</i>
	W	18	Midterm exam
*****Spring Break: March 21-29*****			
Apr	M	30	Singer, "Gimpel the Fool" [Moodle]
	W	1	Mahfouz, "Zaabalawi" [Moodle]
	F	3	Moodle discussion #5

	M	6	Bakr, "That Beautiful Undiscovered Voice"
	W	8	Miller, <i>The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder</i>
	F	10	Moodle discussion #6
	M	13	Kafka, "Reflections on Sin, Suffering, Hope and the True Way"
	W	15	Dostoyevsky, "The Grand Inquisitor"
	F	17	Moodle discussion #7
	M	20	Hesse, Siddhartha [Part One]
	W	22	Siddhartha [Part Two]
	F	24	Moodle discussion #8
	M	27	Nietzsche, "The Madman Parable"; <i>Thus Spoke Zarathustra</i>
	W	29	<i>Thus Spoke Zarathustra</i>
May	F	1	essay #2 due by 5:00 on Moodle
	M	4	<i>Thus Spoke Zarathustra</i> ; Nietzsche, "The Heaviest Weight"
	W	6	Wrapping things up

Final exam: Saturday, May 9th 1:00-4:00