

# Religious Studies 255

## The Religious Traditions of Asia

Fall 2006

Professor Mark W. Muesse

Religion is a vital dimension of human culture and consciousness. Some have even argued that religion is what most profoundly shapes a society's values, ethos, art, literature, economics, and politics. Since religion is so important in human life, and because we increasingly encounter persons and cultures with religious views not our own, it is crucial to understand the many varieties of religions in the world. This course is a beginning on that journey to deeper understanding.

And it is only a beginning. What is meant by the word "religion" is too varied and too complex for this short course to be anything but a start to an odyssey that can take a lifetime. We will not attempt to assimilate the full range of religious phenomena during this semester; rather, we will sample only a few aspects of a limited number of religious traditions, focusing our attention on the religions of Asia.

The goals of this course are far more than simply learning facts and data about Asian religions, although learning the important details is fundamental. Beyond the mere acquisition of data, the study of religion promises to sharpen our skills in the empathetic understanding of difference. And perhaps by learning more about other cultures and traditions we may learn more about ourselves. Says the poet Rudyard Kipling, "What should they of England know who only England know?"

### Texts and Films

#### *Primary Text:*

John Y. Fenton, et al., *Religions of Asia*, third edition. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993.

#### *Supplementary Texts:*

*The Upanishads*. Trans., Juan Mascaró. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1965.

Stephen P. Huyler, *Meeting God: Elements of Hindu Devotion*. Yale University Press, 1999.

*Bhagavad Gita: Krishna's Counsel in Time of War*. Trans., Barbara Stoler Miller. New York: Bantam Books, 1986.

Michael Carrithers, *Buddha: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983, 1996.

Hermann Hesse. *Siddhartha*. Trans., Hilda Rosner. Toronto: Bantam Books, 1951.

Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of Understanding: Commentaries on the Prajñāparamita Heart Sutra*. Ed., Peter Levitt. Berkeley, Calif.: Parallax Press, 1988.

Confucius, *The Analects*. Trans., Raymond Dawson. Oxford University Press, 2000.

*The Daodejing of Laozi*. Trans., Philip J. Ivanhoe. New York: Hackett Publication Co Inc., Reprint edition, 2002, 2003.

In addition, a collection of required readings is available for purchase in the College Bookstore.

*Films:*

Required

The following films are also required for the course and are on reserve in DVD at the Barret Library Media Center.

- “The Altar of Fire”
- “330 Million Gods”
- “In the Footprints of the Buddha”
- “Requiem for a Faith”
- “A Question of Balance”
- “Land of the Disappearing Buddha”

Recommended

These videotaped series can provide excellent supplements to our study of these two religions. They are also available in the Media Center in VHS or for purchase as books, DVD, audio cassette, or CD from <http://www.teach12.com>.

Mark W. Muesse, *Great World Religions: Hinduism*. Chantilly, VA: The Teaching Company, 2003.

Malcolm David Eckel, *Great World Religions: Buddhism*. Chantilly, VA: The Teaching Company, 2003.

## Course Requirements

Final course grades will be based on these components:

- Participation and preparation. It is important that each person come to class adequately prepared, having read the assignments and thoughtfully considered them. The Course Outline details the readings that should be completed prior to class.
- 10% Film synopses. You are required to view six films outside of class and write a one page, typed double-space synopsis of each. The synopsis should include a brief summary of the film and a statement indicating what for you was the most interesting, most informative, or most puzzling feature of the film. The synopses will be graded as  $\sqrt{+}$ ,  $\sqrt{}$ ,  $\sqrt{-}$ , or 0.
- 40% Essays. There will be five brief writing assignments on various topics. The assignments follow the Course Outline on this syllabus. Each paper counts 8% of the final grade.
- 30% Tests. Two tests covering the lectures, readings, and films for the first and second thirds of the course. The tests comprise objective identification and essay questions. Each

test counts 15% of the final grade for the course. There will be a study guide available for each test. Blue books will be used for the tests and the final examination.

- 20% Final examination. The exam will be comprehensive but will emphasize the final third of the course.

### **Incompletes**

An incomplete grade may be given to a student who is unable to complete the required coursework because of illness or other extenuating circumstances. Students wishing to receive an incomplete must consult with me prior to the final examination. Upon my approval, the student must submit the appropriate application to the Registrar before final grades are due. All unfinished work must then be completed and submitted to me by the end of the second week of the following semester.

### **Attendance Policy**

It is essential to attend class. What you learn from the lectures and discussions goes well beyond what can be measured on tests, so simply mastering the test material is not sufficient for the successful completion of the course. Accordingly, I do not reckon absences as excused or unexcused. If you choose to miss class to participate in an extracurricular or other activity, your choice indicates the priority you give to this course and the grade you receive will reflect that decision. Each student is permitted three absences during the semester without an adverse effect on the grade. After the third absence, however, each subsequent absence will lower the final numeric average by one point. Twelve absences will thus drop an 87 to 78.

### **Grace**

You may have observed it's not a perfect world, and from time-to-time, we all need a little slack. I recognize this. There may come a time when you need to turn in a late paper or need some other slight bend of the rules. You can count on *one* act of grace during the semester to help get you back on track. But since I'm not god, my supply of grace is limited. Don't count on getting too much slack.

### **Students with Disabilities**

I will provide reasonable accommodations for students with documented psychological and physical disabilities. For further information, please speak to me.

### **Computers**

I encourage you to check your e-mail frequently for announcements and other matters concerning this course. I will use the e-mail to communicate with you collectively and individually. It is often easier to contact me through e-mail than by telephone. My e-mail address is [muesse@rhodes.edu](mailto:muesse@rhodes.edu). All PowerPoint presentations will be available on the Academic Departments and Programs fileserver: <\\Fileserver1\acad\_dept\_pgm\Relig\_Studies\Muesse\_Mark\Public/>.

### **Office Information**

I am happy to meet with you for any reason. My office is located in 411 Clough. You may drop in during office hours: MWF, 10:00-11:00 AM; TTh, 1:00-3:00 PM. If these times are not convenient for you, please call or e-mail me to make an appointment for another time. My campus extension is 3909, and my home number is 278-0788.

## Course Outline

### INTRODUCTION

- 23 August **Introduction to the course**
- 25 August **India and the World's Religions**  
Fenton, *Religions of Asia*, 1-24b (“a” and “b” indicate the left and right columns respectively).  
[Muesse, TTC Lecture 1]

### THE EARLY CULTURES OF SOUTH ASIA

- 28 August **Indus Valley civilization**  
Fenton, *Religions of Asia*, 24b-27a;  
<http://www.harappa.com/har/indus-saraswati.html>;  
<http://www.harappa.com/har/indus-saraswati-geography.html>;  
<http://www.harappa.com/har/ancient-indus-sites.html>;  
<http://www.mohenjodaro.net/> .  
[Muesse, TTC Lecture 2]
- 30 August **Aryan migrations and the world of the Vedas**  
Fenton, *Religions of Asia*, 27b-35a.  
[Muesse, TTC Lectures 2 and 3]
- 1 September **The world of the Vedas**  
“The Vedas,” 3-20 (Readings).  
[Muesse, TTC Lecture 3]
- 4 September **Labor Day**
- 6 September **The world of the Vedas**  
“The Vedas,” 20-36 (Readings).  
[Muesse, TTC Lecture 3]  
ESSAY 1 DUE
- 8 September **Vedic ritual and sacrifice**  
Fenton, *Religions of Asia*, 35a-39.  
[Muesse, TTC Lecture 4]
- 11 September **Vedic ritual and sacrifice**  
Fenton, *Religions of Asia*, 32-33 (review).  
[Muesse, TTC Lecture 4]

## FILM SYNOPSIS ON “THE ALTAR OF FIRE” DUE.

## CLASSICAL HINDUISM

- 13 September      **The development of caste and dharma**  
Fenton, *Religions of Asia*, 40-45a;  
Selections from “Laws of Manu” (Readings).  
[Muesse, TTC Lecture 5 and 6]
- 15 September      **Samsara and karma**  
Fenton, *Religions of Asia*, 45b-52.  
[Muesse, TTC Lecture 4]
- 18 September      **Sexuality and gender in the Hindu world**  
*Kama Sutra*, Parts I, III, IV (Chapter 1), V (Chapter 1) at:  
<http://www.sacred-texts.com/sex/kama/index.htm>  
[Muesse, TTC Lecture 6]
- 20 September      **Jñāna-yoga**  
Fenton, *Religions of Asia*, 53-65;  
Huyler, *Meeting God*, 232-250.  
In class film: “Hindu Asceticism”  
[Muesse, TTC Lecture 8]
- 22 September      **The Upanishads and Vedanta**  
Mascaró, *The Upanishads*, 49-84.  
[Muesse, TTC Lecture 8]
- 25 September      **The Upanishads and Vedanta**  
Mascaró, *The Upanishads*, 85-143.  
[Muesse, TTC Lecture 8]
- 27 September      **First Test**
- 29 September      **Bhakti-yoga**  
Fenton, *Religions of Asia*, 66-68b;  
Huyler, *Meeting God*, 10-63.  
[Muesse, TTC Lecture 9]
- 2 October          **Hindu theology**  
Fenton, *Religions of Asia*, 69a-80;  
Huyler, *Meeting God*, 64-155.  
[Muesse, TTC Lecture 9 and 11]
- 4 October          **Hindu theology**  
Huyler, *Meeting God*, 156-231.  
FILM SYNOPSIS ON “330 MILLION GODS” DUE.

- 6 October           **The Bhagavad-gita: On the field of dharma**  
 Miller, *Bhagavad Gita: Krishna's Counsel in Time of War*, 1-75.  
 In class film clip: "The Mahabharata"  
 [Muesse, TTC Lecture 10]
- Saturday, 7 October  
 11:00 AM           **Field Trip to the India Cultural Center and Temple**  
<http://www.icctmemphis.org/>
- 9 October           **The Bhagavad-gita: On the field of dharma**  
 Miller, *Bhagavad Gita: Krishna's Counsel in Time of War*, 77-154.  
 [Muesse, TTC Lecture 10]  
 ESSAY 2 DUE

#### BUDDHISM

- 11 October           **An Introduction to Buddhism**  
 Fenton, *Religions of Asia*, 103-107a;  
 Carrithers, *Buddha*, 1-27.  
 [Eckel, TTC Lecture 1]
- 13 October           **The Life of Shakyamuni Buddha**  
 Carrithers, *Buddha*, 28-78.  
 In class film clip: "Little Buddha"  
 [Eckel, TTC Lecture 2]
- 16 October           **Fall Recess**
- 18 October           **The Four Noble Truths**  
 Fenton, *Religions of Asia*, 107a-108a;  
 Carrithers, *Buddha*, 79-102.  
 [Eckel, TTC Lecture 3]
- 20 October           **The Noble Eightfold Path**  
 Fenton, *Religions of Asia*, 108b-109a.  
 [Eckel, TTC Lecture 4]  
 FILM SYNOPSIS ON "IN THE FOOTPRINTS OF THE BUDDHA" DUE.
- 23 October           **Early Buddhism**  
 Hesse, *Siddhartha*.  
 ESSAY 3 DUE  
 [Eckel, TTC Lecture 5]
- 25 October           **The rise and fall of Indian Buddhism**  
 Fenton, *Religions of Asia*, 109b-131.  
 [Eckel, TTC Lecture 6]
- 27 October           **Second Test**

- 30 October      **The development of the Mahayana**  
 Hanh, *The Heart of Understanding*.  
 [Eckel, TTC Lecture 6, 7, and 8]
- 1 November      **Tantra and Vajrayana**  
 Fenton, *Religions of Asia*, 132-148a;  
 “Introduction to Tantra,” 1-27 (Readings)  
 [Muesse, TTC Lecture 11; Eckel, TTC Lecture 10]
- 3 November      **Tantra and Vajrayana**  
 Fenton, *Religions of Asia*, 148a-157;  
 FILM SYNOPSIS ON “REQUIEM FOR A FAITH” DUE
- SMALLER TRADITIONS OF SOUTH ASIA
- 6 November      **The Jains**  
 Fenton, *Religions of Asia*, 89-94a;  
 “The Basic Doctrines of Jainism” (Readings).
- 8 November      **The Sikhs**  
 Fenton, *Religions of Asia*, 94a-99;  
 Readings TBA.  
 [Muesse, TTC Lecture 12]
- RELIGIONS OF EAST ASIA
- 10 November      **Early Chinese culture**  
 Fenton, *Religions of Asia*, 160-167b;  
 Other readings TBA.
- 13 November      **Early Chinese culture**  
 Readings TBA.
- 15 November      **Kong-zi and Confucianism**  
 Fenton, *Religions of Asia*, 167b-172a;  
 Confucius, *The Analects*, 3-38.
- 17 November      **Religion in China**  
 Confucius, *The Analects*, 39-82.
- 20 November      No class  
 ESSAY 4 DUE
- 22 November      **Thanksgiving Break**
- 24 November      **Thanksgiving Break**

27 November	<p><b>Laozi and Daoism</b>  Fenton, <i>Religions of Asia</i>, 172b-175;  Ivanhoe, <i>The Daodejing of Laozi</i>.  FILM SYNOPSIS ON “A QUESTION OF BALANCE” DUE</p>
29 November	<p><b>Daoism</b>  Readings TBA  ESSAY 5 DUE</p>
1 December	<p><b>Japanese religions</b>  Fenton, <i>Religions of Asia</i>, 197-98;  Other readings TBA.  FILM SYNOPSIS ON “LAND OF THE DISAPPEARING BUDDHA” DUE.</p>
4 December	<p><b>Chan (Zen) Buddhism</b>  “Zen Stories” (Readings).  [Eckel, TTC Lecture 12]</p>
6 December	<p><b>Shinto and Japanese religion</b>  Fenton, <i>Religions of Asia</i>, 198b-203b;  “Japanese Cosmogony”;  Other readings TBA.</p>
13 December 5:30 PM	<p><b>Final examination</b></p>

## Essay Assignments

Each essay should be 2-3 pages in length, typed double-space.

### Essay 1 Reading the *Rig Veda*

The following assignment is an exercise in interpreting difficult texts. This passage, taken from the *Rig Veda*, offers a slightly different translation from the same hymn that appears in your collection of readings for this course. In a brief essay, write an interpretation of this passage. Consider such questions as these: What is this point of the text? What sense do you make of its obscure imagery (e.g., “darkness was hidden by darkness”; “neither death nor immortality”)? What significance might this hymn have had for those who wrote it and those who first heard it? What significance might it have now?

Think about this question as it pertains to this text and other difficult texts generally: How does one know when one’s interpretation is correct, accurate, or appropriate?

There was neither non-existence nor existence then; there was neither the realm of space nor the sky which is beyond. What stirred? Where? In whose protection? Was there water, bottomlessly deep?

There was neither death nor immortality then. There was no distinguishing sign of night nor of day. That one breathed, windless, by its own impulse. Other than that there was nothing beyond.

Darkness was hidden by darkness in the beginning; with no distinguishing sign, all this was water. The life force that was covered with emptiness, that one arose through the power of heat.

Desire came upon that one in the beginning; that was the first seed of mind. Poets seeking in their hearts with wisdom found the bond of existence in non-existence.

Their cord was extended across. Was there below? Was there above? There were seed-placers; there were powers. There was impulse beneath; there was giving-forth above.

Who really knows? Who will here proclaim it? Whence was it produced? Whence this creation? The gods came afterwards, with the creation of this universe. Who then knows from whence it has arisen?

Whence this creation has arisen—perhaps it formed itself, or perhaps it did not—the one who looks down on it, in the highest heaven, only he knows—or perhaps he does not know (Hymn 10.129, *The Rig Veda: An Anthology*, pp. 25, 26).

## Essay 2 The *Gita* and Its Significance

The *Bhagavad Gita* is perhaps the most well-known and best-loved Hindu scripture. Although the story concerns the god Krishna and an ancient Kṣatriya, Hindus of all castes and spiritual paths find the text meaningful and compelling. Using specific examples from the book, explain what you understand to be the central message of the *Gita* and offer an explanation for its importance and popularity in the Hindu traditions.

## Essay 3 *Siddhartha*

Choose and write an essay on one of the following topics:

(1) In Hermann Hesse's novel, the protagonist Siddhartha refuses to join Gautama Buddha's monastic community, yet in many ways he is a true follower of the Buddha. In an essay, describe the ways in which Siddhartha's life illustrates or exemplifies fundamental Buddhist principles. Among other things, look for evidence of the following:

- how attachment and illusion lead to suffering.
- how the practice of meditation (or its analogues) lead to liberation.
- the notion of rebirth.
- how ultimate reality is beyond conceptualization and language.
- how “self” is an illusion.

This list is meant to be suggestive, not definitive or exhaustive. Try not to impose an alien framework on the novel such as the Four Noble Truth or the Noble Eightfold Path.

(2) Discuss the symbolic role of water in Hermann Hesse's novel *Siddhartha*. Consider, for example, the ways in which water serves as a metaphor for death and rebirth, the self, time, and nirvana.

Essay 4  
The *Analects* of Confucius

Based on your reading of the *Analects*, write a character sketch of Confucius. What kind of person was he? What qualities best describe him? How was he regarded by others? How did he regard himself?

Essay 5  
Chapter 82 of the *Daodejing*

For this assignment, I'd like you to try your hand at a little poetry. Write an additional chapter to the *Daodejing*, trying to replicate its style and philosophy. Then write a prose explication of your chapter, describing what makes it an appropriate addition to the book.

### How I Grade Essays

Writing and critical thinking are, I believe, the most important parts of a liberal arts education. I therefore take essay writing very seriously and make it a significant part of your final grade. In grading students' essays, I take care to mark them as accurately and as painstakingly as possible. My own experience tells me that one's writing cannot improve unless mistakes are clearly pointed out. Learning to write well is hard work and takes much practice. In this sense, we are all beginners.

To help you in your writing practice for this course, I have outlined below the general principles I use in assessing grades for essays. I readily admit that grading essays--especially papers in the humanities--involves subjective judgments, particularly in the area of content. Ultimately, the grade you receive is the consequence of a judgment part objective and reasonable, part intuitive and aesthetic. In general, I try not to evaluate the particular position or point of view you express; rather, I look at how well you have argued that position, how fully and sympathetically you have considered alternative views, how logical and coherent your point of view is. In the final analysis, I am not really interested in whether or not you believe in God, for example, but I am very interested in *why* you believe or do not believe.

**A**--The A paper is, above all, interesting and effectively written. It demonstrates knowledge of the subject and evidences much thought about it. It is clearly structured and has a carefully argued thesis. The A paper is outstanding in all respects: it is devoid of any mechanical, grammatical, or typographical mistakes. Formal errors will reduce a paper's grade, regardless of content.

**B**--The B paper is missing some element that distinguishes the A essay. Perhaps the paper demonstrates sufficient knowledge and thought, but the presentation is pedestrian. Perhaps the content is thoughtful and interesting, but the essay suffers from mechanical or typographical mistakes.

**C**--The C paper fulfills the terms of the assignment without distinction.

**D**--The D paper is uninteresting, lacking in comprehension, and flawed by mechanical errors.

**F**--The F paper is without merit. It is flagrantly lacking in insight and comprehension, and appears insufficiently acquainted with academic standards for written work.

### *Some Hints for Better Writing*

I expect proper form for papers in the humanities (*MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, fourth edition). I prefer footnotes, but endnotes or parenthetical notes are acceptable. Parenthetical notes should be included within the sentence (the period follows the closed bracket, like this).

Feel free to use the first person.

Do not use the passive voice unless it is absolutely necessary.

Use inclusive language: that is, do not use “man” or “mankind” as the generic term for all of humanity (humankind, humans).

Create an interesting title.

Use “that” and “which” appropriately. (“Which” generally follows a comma.) Use “who” when you are talking about a human being.

If a quotation is more than three lines long, it should be indented and single-spaced, omitting the quotation marks.

Use two spaces between sentences.

Avoid vague abstractions like “the Church.” Specify exactly what you mean.

Paginate (Number the pages!).

Do not use the word “feel” as a substitute for “think.”

Try to avoid inappropriate use of slang (e.g., “It really sucked to be a slave in Egypt.”)

Quote the dictionary only if absolutely demanded by the context. Ordinarily, Webster is not an authority in this course. Never begin an essay with “According to Webster’s Dictionary....”

Always edit. I rarely receive a paper that cannot be improved by eliminating verbiage. Get a pencil (or edit online) and see how many words you can cross out. At the same time, watch for typos, misspellings, and grammatical mistakes. Remember, a computer spell-checker will help with many words, but does not help with the specialized vocabulary that is part of this course.

Always keep a copy of your paper. Please staple the paper in the upper left corner. Do not waste your money on plastic or paper report holders. They are useless, and I will merely throw them away.

When you receive your graded paper, read it carefully. I spend much time and energy grading these essays and usually provide detailed commentary. You will not profit by our efforts--yours and mine--unless you review the graded essay. Always feel free to talk to me about the paper, both before and after it is graded. If you do not understand why the paper receives the grade it does, then we should talk. The essay is only part of what I hope is a semester-long dialogue.

If you are serious about improving your writing skills, you may wish to consult:

William Strunk, Jr. and E. B. White, *The Elements of Style*, 3rd edition, New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1979.

Walters and Kern, "How to Eschew Weasel Words," *Johns Hopkins Magazine* (December 1991).

Natalie Goldberg, *Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within*, Boston: Shambhala, 1986.