

# Rhodes College Digital Archives - DLynx

## RELS 255-01, The Religious Traditions of Asia, Fall 2004

Item Type	Syllabus
Authors	Muesse, Mark W.
Publisher	Memphis, Tenn. : Rhodes College
Rights	Rhodes College owns the rights to the archival digital images in this repository. Images are made available for educational use only and may not be used for any non-educational or commercial purpose. Approved educational uses include private research and scholarship, teaching, and student projects. For additional information please contact <a href="mailto:archives@rhodes.edu">archives@rhodes.edu</a> . Fees may apply.
Download date	2026-03-05 08:44:19
Link to Item	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10267/1638">http://hdl.handle.net/10267/1638</a>

# Religious Studies 255

## The Religious Traditions of Asia

Fall 2004

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 and the Indian subcontinent.

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?"

### Required

#### *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.

*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.

*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.

### Recommended

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.

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

### Course Requirements

Final course grades will be based on these components:

- Class participation and preparation. It is important that each person come to class adequately prepared, having read the assignments and thoughtfully considered them.
- 35% Two tests covering the lectures, readings, and films for the first and second thirds of the course. Each test counts 17.5% of the final grade for the course.
- 25% The final exam will be 25% of the final grade. The exam will be comprehensive but will emphasize the final third of the course.
- 40% Five brief writing assignments on various topics. The assignments follow the Course Outline on this syllabus. Each paper counts 8% of the final grade.

### 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

Many important features of this course will be imparted in class meetings, through lectures, films, and discussions. It is essential, therefore, to attend class. Students will be permitted three absences during the semester. Absences beyond that will result in a reduction in the final grade.

### 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

Date	Topic and Assignment
25 August	<b>Introduction to the course</b>
27 August	<b>Introduction to India</b> Fenton, <i>Religions of Asia</i> , 1-24b [Muesse, TTC Lecture 1]
	THE EARLY CULTURES OF INDIA
30 August	<b>Indus Valley civilization</b> Fenton, <i>Religions of Asia</i> , 24b-27a [Muesse, TTC Lecture 2]
1 September	<b>Aryan migrations and the world of the Vedas</b> Fenton, <i>Religions of Asia</i> , 27b-35a [Muesse, TTC Lectures 2 and 3]

- 3 September      **The world of the Vedas**  
 “The Vedas,” 3-20 (Readings)  
 [Muesse, TTC Lecture 3]
- 6 September      Labor Day Holiday
- 8 September      **The world of the Vedas**  
 “The Vedas,” 20-36 (Readings)  
 [Muesse, TTC Lecture 3]  
 ESSAY ON READING THE RIG VEDA DUE
- 10 September     **Vedic ritual and sacrifice**  
 Fenton, *Religions of Asia*, 35a-39.  
 [Muesse, TTC Lecture 4]
- 13 September     **Vedic ritual and sacrifice**  
 Fenton, *Religions of Asia*, 32-33 (review)  
 Film: “The Altar of Fire”  
 [Muesse, TTC Lecture 4]
- CLASSICAL HINDUISM
- 15 September     **Purity and danger: the development of caste and dharma**  
 Fenton, *Religions of Asia*, 40-45a  
 [Muesse, TTC Lecture 5 and 6]
- 17 September     **Samsara and karma**  
 Fenton, *Religions of Asia*, 45b-52  
 [Muesse, TTC Lecture 4]
- 20 September     **Sexuality and gender in the Hindu world**  
 Marglin, “Female Sexuality in the Hindu World” (Readings)  
 Film: “Marriages in Heaven”  
 [Muesse, TTC Lecture 6]
- 22 September     **Jñāna-yoga**  
 Fenton, *Religions of Asia*, 53-65  
 Film: “Hindu Asceticism”  
 [Muesse, TTC Lecture 8]
- 24 September     **The Upanishads and Vedānta**  
 Mascaró, *The Upanishads*, 49-84  
 [Muesse, TTC Lecture 8]

- 27 September      **The Upanishads and Vedanta**  
Mascaró, *The Upanishads*, 85-143  
[Muesse, TTC Lecture 8]
- 29 September      First Test
- 1 October          **Bhakti-yoga**  
Fenton, *Religions of Asia*, 66-68b  
[Muesse, TTC Lecture 9]
- 4 October          **Hindu theology**  
Fenton, *Religions of Asia*, 69a-80  
[Muesse, TTC Lecture 9 and 11]
- 6 October          **Hindu theology**  
Film: “300 Million Gods”
- 8 October          **The Bhagavad-gita: On the field of dharma**  
Miller, *Bhagavad Gita: Krishna’s Counsel in Time of War*, 1-75  
Film clip: “The Mahabharata”  
[Muesse, TTC Lecture 10]
- 11 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 ON THE GITA AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE DUE

#### BUDDHISM

- 13 October         **An Introduction to Buddhism**  
Fenton, *Religions of Asia*, 103-107a  
Carrithers, *Buddha*, 1-27.  
[Eckel, TTC Lecture 1]
- 15 October         **The Life of Shakyamuni Buddha**  
Carrithers, *Buddha*, 28-78.  
Film clip: “Little Buddha”  
[Eckel, TTC Lecture 2]
- 18 October         Fall Break

- 20 October      **The Four Holy Truths**  
 Fenton, *Religions of Asia*, 107a-108a  
 Carrithers, *Buddha*, 79-102.  
 Film: “In the Footprints of the Buddha”  
 [Eckel, TTC Lecture 3]
- 22 October      **The Noble Eightfold Path**  
 Fenton, *Religions of Asia*, 108b-109a  
 [Eckel, TTC Lecture 4]
- 25 October      **Early Buddhism**  
 Hesse, *Siddhartha*  
 ESSAY ON SIDDHARTHA DUE  
 [Eckel, TTC Lecture 5]
- 27 October      **The rise and fall of Indian Buddhism**  
 Fenton, *Religions of Asia*, 109b-131  
 [Eckel, TTC Lecture 6]
- 29 October      **The development of the Mahayana**  
 Hanh, *The Heart of Understanding*  
 [Eckel, TTC Lecture 6, 7, and 8]
- 1 November      Second Test
- 3 November      **Tantra and Vajrayana**  
 Fenton, *Religions of Asia*, 132-148a  
 [Muesse, TTC Lecture 11; Eckel, TTC Lecture 10]
- 5 November      **Tantra and Vajrayana**  
 Fenton, *Religions of Asia*, 148a-157

#### HETERODOX TRADITIONS OF INDIA

- 8 November      **The Jains**  
 Fenton, *Religions of Asia*, 89-94a; “The Basic Doctrines of Jainism”  
 (Readings)
- 10 November      **The Sikhs**  
 Fenton, *Religions of Asia*, 94a-99; “The Religion and Social  
 Organization of the Sikhs” (Readings)  
 [Muesse, TTC Lecture 12]

## ESSAY ON KARMA DUE

## RELIGIONS OF CHINA AND JAPAN

- 12 November **Early Chinese culture**  
Fenton, *Religions of Asia*, 160-167b
- 15 November **Early Chinese culture**
- 19 November **Kong-zi and Confucianism**  
Fenton, *Religions of Asia*, 167b-172a; Books I-IV of *The Analects*  
(Readings)
- 22 November **Religion in China**  
Film: "A Question of Balance"
- 24 November Thanksgiving break
- 26 November Thanksgiving break
- 29 November **Lao-zi and Daoism**  
Fenton, *Religions of Asia*, 172b-175
- 1 December **Daoism**  
Ivanhoe, *The Daodejing of Laozi*  
ESSAY ON THE DAODEJING DUE
- 3 December **Japanese religions**  
Fenton, *Religions of Asia*, 197-98  
Film: "Land of the Disappearing Buddha"
- 6 December **Chan (Zen) Buddhism**  
"Zen Stories" (Readings)  
[Eckel, TTC Lecture 12]
- 8 December **Shinto and Japanese religion**  
Fenton, *Religions of Asia*, 198b-203b; "Japanese Cosmogony"  
(Readings)
- 10 December **Final examination**  
1:00 PM

## 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  
*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 3  
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 4  
Karma

In examining the world of the Jains, we encounter once again the notion of karma, a concept we have met before in classical Hinduism and Buddhism. Consider the several understandings of karma we have studied and write an essay in which you argue for or against the basic karmic principle: over time, all positive actions have positive consequences that return to the agent and all

negative actions have negative consequences that return to the agent. If you cannot accept the principle in this form, can you accept it with modification?

## Essay 5 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.