

Religious Studies 101

Encountering Religion in Global Context

Joseph Adler
O'Connor 204
adlerj@kenyon.edu
427-5290

Spring 2014
MWF 11:10-12:00 (Per. 4)
Ascension 226
Office hours: MWF 3:10-4, Th 2-4
and by appointment

- [Links](#)
- [Selected handouts / readings](#)
- [Paper format guide](#)
- [Paper criteria](#)

The aim of this course is to help you to think clearly and critically about the various human phenomena that we call "religious," and to provide a brief introduction to some of the world's major religious traditions. The academic study of religion takes a global and pluralistic approach, looking at religion critically and analytically, with as much objectivity as possible, while also attempting to develop and maintain sensitivity to subtle and sometimes inexpressible levels of human meaning.

This combination of critical analysis and intuitive understanding requires, as a crucial first step, that we attempt to set aside, or "bracket," our own beliefs and assumptions about the meaning of human life, the existence or non-existence of gods, and the truth or untruth of particular religious traditions. Only then can we attempt to understand other religious traditions on their own terms, in their own frameworks of beliefs, and in their own social and historical contexts. To do otherwise, i.e. to bring our own religious assumptions to the material we study, would be valid or meaningful only within the context of our own religious tradition and community.

Our perspective here, though, is the pluralistic world in which we live, and the Western academic tradition, which has its own values and assumptions. This means, incidentally, that we do not claim to have privileged access to a universal, objective truth. But we do assume that religion can and should be subjected to the same critical analysis that we apply to other areas of human activity and experience. If "the unexamined life is not worth living," then it surely follows that the academic study of religion -- a universal aspect of human life -- is a necessary part of a liberal education. For further discussion of this topic, see my article in the Kenyon College *Alumni Bulletin*, Winter/Spring 1998 (<http://bulletin.kenyon.edu/x1621.xml>).

This semester we will examine some of the basic concepts and categories in the academic study of religion (e.g. myth, ritual, religious experience) and apply them to brief surveys of a selection of world religions. In these surveys we will attempt to understand (1) some of the basic features of the worldview of each tradition, (2) how the traditions have developed through history and reflected historical conditions, (3) how various traditions give expression to universal religious phenomena, and (4) how religion contributes to the shaping of cultures. Our readings include both primary religious texts and secondary studies, and will be supplemented by films. The format of the class is a combination of lecture and discussion. Students are expected to have read the assigned material and to participate actively in class discussion.

Reading:

- Willard G. Oxtoby and Alan F. Segal, eds., *A Concise Introduction to World Religions*, 2nd ed.
- Barbara Stoler Miller, trans., *The Bhagavad-Gita*
- [Moodle readings](#) (must be printed out and brought to class)

Course Requirements and Grading

1. **Participation** (15%). Regular attendance, timely completion of reading assignments, active participation in class discussions, and one short conference with me in my office no later than *Wednesday, Jan. 29*.

Grading criteria are as follows:

- A: Regular attendance (no more than 3 unexcused absences), regular contribution to discussion (at least once a week)
- B: Regular attendance, occasional contribution
- C: Too many absences OR too little contribution
- D: Too many absences AND too little contribution
- F: Other serious problems

Option: To supplement the *class discussion* portion of your participation grade for any week, you may turn in a written "reaction paper" (1-2 pages, typed, maximum one per week) containing your reactions to, reflections on, and/or questions about course readings, films, and lectures. These will be graded 1 (credit), 2 (good), or 3 (excellent) and will be returned within a week with comments. The best times to turn these in would be on Mondays, after we have completed a section.

2. **Two take-home essays** (20% each). Topics will be assigned one week in advance. You must follow the [Paper format guide](#), except that you do not need a bibliography if you only use assigned readings. No electronic submissions will be accepted.
3. **Two quizzes** (10% each), consisting of fill-in-the-blank questions. Study sheets will be given out one week in advance.
4. **Final exam** (25%), consisting of short questions (like the quizzes) and one or two essays.

5. Notes:

- *Laptops* are not allowed in class unless Erin Salva says you need one (see below).
- *Cellphones* must be turned completely off.
- *Online readings* must be printed out and brought to class. This is because I want you to engage with the readings by marking them up with notes.
- No written assignments will be accepted electronically.
- If you have a disability that will affect your work or participation in this class, please contact Erin Salva, Coordinator of Disability Services at 427-5453 or salvae@kenyon.edu, and speak to me individually, early in the semester, about any arrangements you will need.
- **Academic Integrity:**
At Kenyon we expect all students, at all times, to submit work that represents the highest standards of academic integrity. It is the responsibility of each student to learn and practice the proper ways of documenting and acknowledging those whose ideas and words they have drawn upon (see "[Academic Honesty and Questions of Plagiarism](#)" in the Course Catalog). Ignorance and carelessness are not excuses for academic dishonesty. If you are uncertain about the expectations for this class, please ask for clarification.

COURSE SCHEDULE

1 Jan 13-17 What is religion? What is the study of religion?
 ❖ Definitions, dimensions, and approaches

- Reading:**
- *World Religions*, ch. 1
 - [Moodle](#):
 - Ninian Smart, "Six Dimensions of Religion"
 - James Livingston, "The Sacred and the Holy"

2-3 Jan 20-31 ❖ The sacred / holy
 ❖ Numinous & mystical experience
 ❖ Myth & ritual

- Reading:**
- [Moodle](#):
 - Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (excerpts)
 - Robert C. Monk, "Mysticism in Religious Experience"
 - Ninian Smart, "Ritual"
 - Black Elk, "The Offering of the Pipe"
 - Barbara Sproul, "Myths of India"
 - *Genesis*, chs. 1-4, 6-9, 12-13, 15-19, 22

4 Feb 3-7 Judaism (1)

- Reading:**
- *World Religions*, ch. 3: 80-108
 - [Moodle](#):
 - *Exodus* 3, 12, 14, 19-20
 - *Leviticus* 19
 - Mary Douglas, "The Abominations of Leviticus"



5 Feb 10-14 Judaism (2)



- Reading:**
- *World Religions*, ch. 3: 108-139
 - [Moodle](#):
 - *Isaiah* 1, 6
 - *Amos* 1-9
 - *Torah*, *Mishnah*, Maimonides, and *Zohar* (excerpts)
 - *Job* (excerpts)
 - Dead Sea Scrolls (excerpts)

6 Feb 17-21

Christianity (1)

❖ A Jewish sect

Monday: Quiz 1**Film:** *From Jesus to Christ*, parts 1-3

Portrait of Jesus from
the catacombs

- Reading:**
- *World Religions*, ch. 4: 140-167
 - [Moodle:](#)
 - *Galatians* 1-2
 - *Romans* 3
 - *1 Corinthians* 15
 - Additional selections (**handout**)



Jesus as Christ (catacomb painting)

These pictures come from the PBS website for the film, *From Jesus to Christ*, which contains much written material that is not in the film.

I highly recommend it:

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/>

7 Feb 24-28

Christianity (2)

❖ A new religion

Wednesday: Essay 1 due by 4:30

- Reading:**
- *World Religions*, ch. 4: 167-207
 - [Moodle:](#)
 - *Mark* 1, 14-16
 - *Matthew* 1-2, 5-7, 26-28
 - *Luke* 1-2, 6, 15, 22-24
 - *John* 1
 - *Acts* 9

<< Spring Break >>

8 Mar 17-21

Islam**Film:** "Guests of God"

- Reading:**
- *World Religions*, ch. 5

9 Mar 24-28 **Hinduism (1)**

Film: "330 Million Gods"

- Reading:**
- *World Religions*, ch. 6
 - [Moodle:](#)
 - *Vedas and Upanishads* (excerpts)
 - *Upanishads* (more)



Shiva, the "erotic ascetic"

10 Mar 31-Apr 4 **Hinduism (2)**

Reading: *The Bhagavad-Gita*: Introduction, chs. 1-6, 9-12, 18

11 Apr 7-11 **Buddhism (1)**

❖ **Buddha, Dharma, & Sangha**

Monday: Quiz 2

Film: "Footprints of the Buddha"

- Reading:**
- *World Religions*, ch. 8: 372-392
 - [Moodle:](#)
 - *The Questions of King Milinda* (excerpts)



Chinese sculpture of the Bodhisattva of Compassion, Avalokitesvara (Guanyin)

12 Apr 14-18 **Buddhism (2)**

❖ **Mahayana**

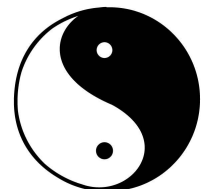
Reading: • *World Religions*, ch. 8: 392-435

13-14 Apr 21-May 2 **Religions of China**

❖ **Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism, Popular religion**

Mon., April 21: Essay 2 due by 4:30

- Reading:**
- *World Religions*, ch. 10, pp. 472-521
 - [Moodle:](#)
 - *Analects* (selection)
 - *Laozi* (selections)
 - *Zhuangzi* (selections)



Final Exam: Thursday, May 8, 7:00-9:00 p.m.