PHIL 330/REL230 – RELIGIONS OF THE EAST

Fall 2013

Time: MWF 11:30 a.m. – 12:20 p.m.
Place: (FRNY) Forney Hall G140

Instructor: Dr. Levi C. Williams
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COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course is designed to introduce students to the religions, cultures and values of Asia. We will focus on the major beliefs, practices, ideals, values, and experiences of the five major traditions that have influenced the traditional forms of Asian thought and culture. These traditions include: Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, and Shinto. (In addition, we will briefly consider Sikhism because it has become an influential presence in India, and Falun Gong or Falun Dafa because of their presence in China). In the context of an historical survey of each of these religions of the world, we will concentrate on the views of the nature of Ultimate Reality, the human person, and the world, as well as values and ideals that give meaning to their societies and institutions. Finally we will explore the place of these religions in Asian cultures today.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

At the end of the course, students are expected to:

1. understand the historical backgrounds of the religions we study;
2. discuss the core beliefs and practices of these religions;
3. recognize religion as a valuable cultural expression that gives identity;
4. explain the meaning of religion and the theories about the origins of religions;
5. be familiar with the sacred scriptures of these religions;
6. appreciate the relevance of religious values in societies and institutions;
7. be able to compare and contrast the essential elements of these religions.
COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Students are responsible for all the readings and the assignments in the course. There will be three exams during the semester. For extra credit, students have the option of visiting one religious center of any of the religions we study and write a two-page reflection paper on their experience.

REQUIRED COURSE BOOKS


HANDOUTS

SUPPLEMENTARY BOOKS (Not Required)


GRADING SYSTEM
Exam 1 = 25%
Exam 2 = 35%
Final Exam= 40%

A  100-95%  (4.00)  C+  84-82%  (2.33)
A-  94-93%  (3.67)  C  81-79%  (2.00)
B+  92-90%  (3.33)  C-  78-76%  (1.67)
B   89-87%  (3.00)  D+  75-74%  (1.33)
B-  86-85%  (2.67)  D  73-70%  (1.00)  F  69- (0.00)

COURSE OUTLINE

Week 1 – August 19, 21, 23 – Discussing religion; the theories of the origin of religion

The semester begins with discussions around the meaning of religion. We will also consider major theories about how religion came into existence and identify some traits of religion.

Readings:
Hopfe & Woodward, pp. 2-26

Week 2 – August 26, 28, 30 – The Indus-Saravasti Civilization, the Vedic Period, and the Rise of India

Hinduism is considered one of the oldest and most intricate religions in the world. What was the context in which Hinduism originated? What was the Vedic period? What is the nature and content of the Vedas? Where do these fit in the context of India’s history? These are some of the questions we will address this week.

Readings:
Hopfe & Woodward, pp. 72-89
Fieser & Powers, pp. 1-16

Week 3 – September 4, 6 – Hindu Epics: Ramayana and The Bhagavad Gita (Mahabhrata)
A significant amount of Hindu ethical beliefs are located in two epics: Ramayana and Bhagavad Gita. The Gita belongs to the larger book known as Mahabharata. What are the central teachings in these epics?

**Readings:**
Miller  
Fieser & Powers, pp. 42-47

**Week 4 – September 9, 11, 13 – Ultimate Reality, humanity and the world in Hindu religious and ethical thought**

Hindus call their religion Sanatana Dharma, which means, “the everlasting dharma” or “eternal truth.” How does this description reflect Hindu theism? How does it influence their view of the human person, their understanding of the world and Hindu communities? These questions will be the focus of this week’s discussion.

**Readings:**
Hopfe & Woodward, pp. 92-100  
Fieser & Powers, pp. 21-31

**Week 5 – September 16, 18, 20 – Hindu deities, worship and cultural expressions**

Hindus believe in one God, Brahman but Brahman has millions of avatars. How do they explain this and who are some of the major deities in Hinduism? What are common symbols and way of life among Hindus?

**Readings:**
Hopfe & Woodward, pp. 92-96  
Fieser & Powers, pp. 50-56

**Exam #1 – September 20**

**Week 6 – September 23, 25, 27 – The life and teachings of the Buddha, and the expansion of Buddhism**

Prince Siddhartha Gautama, who became known as the Buddha (“Enlightened One”), was the founder of Buddhism. What factors led to this event? What are the Buddha’s central teachings? How did Buddhism spread? Where is Buddhism located in the world today?

**Readings:**
Hopfe & Woodward, pp. 128-134  
Fieser & Powers, pp. 77-91
**Week 7 – September 23, 25, 27 – Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism**

Following the death of the Buddha, his disciples could not agree on the real meaning of his teachings and what teachings were essential to Buddhism. This led to two major splits (Theravada and Mahayana) and eventually more divisions within the Mahayana branch such as Zen, Pure Land, among others. What are the distinguishing characteristics and beliefs of these groups and what do they have in common?

**Readings:**
Hopfe & Woodward, pp. 134-140
Nhat, H, pp. 3-256
Fieser & Powers, pp. 88-104

**Week 8 – September 30, October 2, 4 – Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism**

Although Tibetan Buddhism is considered a part of Mahayana Buddhism, there are those who describe it as “Vajrayana” or “Thunderbolt Vehicle.” This week we will continue our discussion of Buddhism.

**Readings:**
Hopfe & Woodward, pp. 141-146
Fieser & Powers, pp. 107-134

**Fall break – October 7**

**Week 9 – October 9, 11 – Contemporary Buddhism.**

As we begin the second half of the semester, we will discuss how Buddhism is engaging the world today by looking at Buddhist leaders such as Aung San Su Kyi, the Dalai Lama, and Thich Nhat Hahn, as well as identify the contributions Buddhism is making to the world today

**Readings:**
Hopfe & Woodward, pp. 147-150

**Week 10 – October 14, 16, 18 – Sikhism**
Sikhism became an influential presence in India during the last 25 years. What was the context of this religion? Who was its founder and what are the fundamental beliefs?

**Readings:**
Hopfe & Woodward, pp. 156-165  
Fieser & Powers, pp. 135-153

**Exam #2 - October 18**

**Week 11 – October 21, 23, 25 – The Chinese Context of Taoism**

This week we will provide a historical background of China and how feudalism and the warring states gave rise to two major Chinese religious and philosophical schools of thought. We will also explore common themes in Chinese religious and philosophical development as well as discuss Taoism, especially as expressed in the *Tao Te Ching*.

**Readings:**
Hopfe & Woodward, pp. 172-185  
*Tao Te Ching*  
Fung, chs. 1-2,

**Week 12 – October 28, 30, November 1 – The Chinese context of Kung Fu-tzu (Confucius)**

Confucius is recognized as a leading Chinese social reformer and humanist. Who was he? What did he believe and teach? What is the extent of his influence in China? What are some essential teachings in Confucianism and *The Analects*?

**Readings:**
Hopfe & Woodward, pp. 186-196  
*The Analects*  
Fung, chs. 4-5, 7, 13-15, 24-26

**Week 13 – November 4, 6, 8 – Contemporary presence and influence of Confucianism and Taoism in China; A brief look at Falun Dafa or Falun Gong as a synthesis of Buddhism and Taoism.**

In the 21st century, how are Confucianism and Taoism making their presence felt in China? A mystery religion in China is Falun Dafa or Falun Gong. How did it begin and what are its essential beliefs?

**Readings**

**Week 14 – November 11, 13, 15 – Japan and Shinto**
There are primary historical considerations that make Shinto similar to, yet different from most Asian religions. What are those considerations and what are the essential beliefs of Shinto?

**Readings:**
Hopfe & Woodward, pp. 204-218  
Fieser & Powers, pp. 219-234

**Week 15 – November 18, 20, 22 – Japan and Shinto (Continued)**
This week we will discuss how Shinto shaped Japanese culture and identity.

**Readings:**
Fieser & Powers, pp. 219-234

**Week 16 – November 25, 27, 29 – Eastern Religions and Globalization**
Globalization is about the interconnectedness people around the world feel and the interaction they experience as a result of several factors. This week we will consider how the Eastern religions we studied have addressed conflict, peace and reconciliation.

**Readings:**

**Week 17 – December 2, 4, – Eastern Religions and Globalization (Continued)**
We close the semester with a discussion of how Eastern Religions are impacting social change and relating to social institutions in their immediate contexts.

**Readings**

**Review on Friday, December 6**

**FINAL EXAM**