Exploring World Religions

Catalogue Course Description: This course is a comparative inquiry into the nature of global religions. Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam will be studied. Material and social aspects of these religions will be considered along with primary beliefs and practices. The common yearning to experience the divine and the numinous will be emphasized.

Further Details: In this class we will approach the study of religion with three main goals in mind: 1) To learn the beliefs, rituals, and practices of the world’s religions, 2) to question how these traditions are similar and disparate, and 3) to become scholars of religion, developing literacy in how the scholarly community studies and speaks about religion, and asking the question - “what does religion mean?” This is no easy feat, but it can be fun and creative, as well as challenging. Leave your preconceptions at the door. You are not asked to abandon your own faith tradition, but rather to explore the questions that religious scholars have been asking for centuries; big and small. We will compare and contrast religious traditions, make grand statements about what they have in common, and then shoot them down to resurrect new ones the next day. In this endeavor we are always aware that neither the general nor the specific is confined to a single worldview or set of rules. No matter how easy it is to state categorically that religion X is monolithic, as scholars of religion we will resist that temptation and search for more complete and “interesting” answers.

Class Structure:

There is no set structure to class and so at times it will be lecture based and at times discussion based. However, whenever possible our stress will be on discussion and group work. To the extent that there is a lecture, it will focus on subject matter relevant to the reading, filling in gaps and adding sources as necessary. On occasion I will bring in audio or video to augment our discussion. If there are pressing questions, I encourage you to ask them, and I will do my best to address and clarify them during the course of class.
Goals of Class Discussions:

Class is an important opportunity to discuss the week’s themes and readings. It is a chance for us to think critically and question some of our own assumptions. We will aim at a thoughtful and thought-provoking discussion. As we go through the semester I want you to develop a sense of responsibility for class discussion, making sure it is robust, on-topic and well thought out. We will cover a lot of material each week and you should approach the readings with the goal of allowing certain sources to speak to you, challenge you, and inspire further reflection. Our discussions will be shaped, to a significant degree by the questions and ideas you bring to class. While we will generally stick to the course outline, I may change readings or subject matter to better address your concerns or interests.

Readings:

On average you will have 50-100 pages of reading per week. I have done my best to provide you with texts that tell a story, while at the same time building an understanding of how religions are studied and imagined by scholars and practitioners. The relaying of stories is an important part of religion, and I hope that we can replicate some of that experience through the texts I have chosen.

While reading an assignment, keep asking:

What does the author mean by that?
Why should I believe that?
So what?

These are the same questions that we will be asking in class, and that I will ask when reading your work. When you find something in the readings that seems vulnerable to criticism, try to formulate the criticism precisely, but then try to imagine how the author might want to respond to your question or objection.

* - Please be aware that the reading for any given week may change, and I will inform you of these changes in advance.

Class Requirements & Grading:

Participation 10%: Participation means actively and thoughtfully contributing to the conversation, as well as actively listening and respecting your classmates’ input. Articulating ideas through participation will also help you to formulate ideas, take exams, and write your essays; as well as reinforce the lectures and reading material. Your participation will also indicate your knowledge of the week’s readings. Active and thoughtful participation is one way to bring up your grade.
Quizzes 6 for 5% each (Drop lowest): You will be given 6 short quizzes at the end of each world religion section as labeled in the syllabus (Quiz dates: Sept. 18, Sep. 25, Oct. 9, Oct. 23, Nov. 6, Dec. 11). These we be 5-10 minute quizzes consisting of 10 questions, testing your basic knowledge of terms and ideas. The lowest grade will be dropped. Since there is no midterm exam these quizzes should help you to prepare for the final exam.

Research Papers & Proposal 30%, 2 for 15% each: These are 7-8 page papers, one for each half of the course. In these papers you will choose one of the three religions that we will cover in that portion of the course and write about a sect that has come out of that religion and the ways that this schism has affected that religious community. On the Tuesday before your paper is due you will provide a short paper topic proposal to be discussed in small breakout groups. I will provide you with a guide to writing proposals and papers (Paper dates: 1- October 13 @12PM & 2- December 8 @ 12PM). Late Essays: Essays turned in after the deadline will lose 1/3 grade (A to A-; A- to B+; B+ to B, etc.) for each 24-hour period late up until the end of the second day. Papers turned in any time after the second day will lose 1 full letter grade (A to B; A- to B-, etc.)

Essay on Things Fall Apart 10%: This is a 4-5 page essay based on the book Things Fall Apart that we will read in the African Religions portion of class. I will provide you with the essay question prior to reading the book (Paper date: November 24 @ 12PM). Late Essays: Essays turned in after the deadline will lose 1/3 grade (A to A-; A- to B+; B+ to B, etc.) for each 24-hour period late up until the end of the second day. Papers turned in any time after the second day will lose 1 full letter grade (A to B; A- to B-, etc.)

Final 25%: The final exam will be cumulative and include Identifications, essays, and a map quiz. The exam date is Tuesday, December 17 from 10:15-12:15PM.

Grading Scale:

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Statement on Academic Integrity
Plagiarism and academic dishonesty constitute serious offenses that undermine your education and violate Sacramento State’s policy on academic integrity and may result in penalties ranging from a lowered grade to course failure. All work submitted in this class must be your own, and must be completed specifically for this class. You may not turn in work previously written for another class. Any use of another’s work without proper attribution constitutes plagiarism. Plagiarism ranges from copying someone else’s work word for word, to rewriting someone else’s work with only minor word changes (mosaic plagiarism), to summarizing work without acknowledging the source. For more information see the library’s page on plagiarism: (http://library.csus.edu/content2.asp?pageID=353)

Expectations:

Attendance: I will not be taking attendance, but excessive lateness and/or absence will negatively affect your performance on exams as well as the participation component of your grade.

Preparation: Being prepared means you have read and taken notes on all of the week’s required reading assignments, have arrived to class with all of the relevant texts, and have brought questions and ideas to class that are important to you, prepared to discuss a range of issues.

Laptops & Cell Phones: Laptops and cell phones are not allowed during class. We should be listening and commenting, keeping a good focus on the direction of the conversation. As we all know, laptops and cell phones can be a serious means of distraction for you and those around you.

Office Hours: Outside of our weekly meetings, I will be available to address any questions, concerns or suggestions you have by e-mail and during office hours. I will do my best to respond to your e-mails within 24 hours, and I encourage you to meet with me to discuss questions you might have about the course material or your broader interests.

Accommodations for Recognized Disabilities: I will make every effort to accommodate your needs as they apply to the above policies. Please come see me in the event that you will need special accommodation so that we can figure out an acceptable solution.

I’m looking forward to a rich and exciting semester.
Course Books & Resources:


Chinua Achebe was a Nigerian novelist, poet, professor, and critic. His first novel *Things Fall Apart* was considered his magnum opus, and is the most widely read book in modern African literature. Although a work of fiction, the story told in this book will help us gain insight into African religion and its eventual encounter with Christianity.


This accessible and informative text was compiled and written by faculty at Sacramento State. It will serve as our guide to the history, practices, and beliefs of the religious communities we will explore in this course.

3) Accompanying texts and videos will be available on the course’s Blackboard site.
Course Outline

Part I: Introduction: What is religion and how is religious studies taught?

In this, our first week, we will start by asking what is religion? How has it been defined and what definition, if any, will we choose? What do scholars mean when they say “World” or “Great” religions? How do we understand the terms Pagan, Monotheistic, Polytheistic? Are there “primitive” vs. “modern” religions? We will also ask questions about the field of religious studies, looking at the short Jaffee and Roach pieces. While reading these texts try and ask yourself: “What are the challenges to teaching religion and how would you teach it?”

Week 1
September 1-5

September 4:
Introductions

In Class Reading:
Martin Jaffee, “Personal Self-Disclosure,” 29-34

Part II: World Religions & Hinduism

Week 2
September 8-12

Sept. 11 Readings
Invitation to World Religions, 3-25, 83-116

Week 3: Hinduism (Continued)
September 15-19

Sept. 18 Readings
- Invitation to World Religions, 116-143

See Blackboard for:
- Excerpts of Mahatma Gandhi’s Writing
- Readings from the Bhagavad Gita

Quiz 1 on September 18
Part III: Chinese Religions

Week 4
September 22-26

Sept. 25 Reading
*Invitation to World Religions*, 263-313

See Blackboard for:

Quiz 2 on September 25

Part IV: Buddhism

Week 5
September 29-October 3

Oct. 2 Reading & Paper Proposals
*Invitation to World Religions*, 145-209

Week 6: Buddhism (Continued)
October 6-10

Oct. 9 Reading

See Blackboard for:
- Buddhism: A Way of Life and Thought by Nancy Wilson Ross, 141-174

Quiz 3 on October 9

First Research Paper due Monday October 13 @ 12PM
Part V: Judaism

Week 7
October 13-17

October 16 Reading
*Invitation to World Religions*, 341-399

Week 8: Judaism Continued
October 20-24

Oct. 23 Reading & Film

See Blackboard for:
*The Quarrel*, 1 hour 28 minutes & Companion Question Sheet

See Blackboard for:
- Readings in Rabbinic Law
- Readings in Jewish Mysticism

Quiz 4 on October 23

Part VI: Christianity

Week 9
October 27-31

Oct. 30 Reading
*Invitation to World Religions*, 401-457

Week 10: Christianity Continued
November 3-7

Nov. 6 Reading & Documentary

See Blackboard for:
- Reza Aslan, *Zealot*, xvii-xxxii, 183-216
- *Jonestown: The Life and Death of Peoples Temple*, 1 hour 25 minutes & Companion Question Sheet

Quiz 5 on November 6
Part VII: African Religions and Chinua Achebe

Week 11
November 10-14

Nov. 13 Reading
*Invitation to World Religions*, 55-81
Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 3-86

Week 12: African Religions and Chinua Achebe Continued
November 17-21

Nov. 20 Reading
Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 86-209

Things Fall Apart PaperDue Monday, November 24 at 12PM

Part VIII: Islam

Week 13
November 24-28

Thanksgiving Reading
*Invitation to World Religions*, 459-487

November 27, Happy Thanksgiving!

Week 14: Islam Continued
December 1-5

Dec. 4 Reading & Paper Proposal
*Invitation to World Religions*, 488-513

See Blackboard for:
- The Night Journey and the Ascension of Muhammad: pg. 68 (3.2.2) - 72 (end of first paragraph) in Textual Sources
- Tahira Naqvi, *Dying in a Strange Country*, 1-28

Second Research Paper Due Monday December 8 @ 12PM
**Week 15: Islam (Continued) & Wrap Up**
December 8-12

**Dec. 11**

See Blackboard for:
- Mattson, Ingrid, *The Story of the Qur’an*, 76-85

**Quiz 6 on December 11**

**Final Exam Tuesday December 17\textsuperscript{th} 10:15-12:15PM**