

The Challenge of World Religions to Christian Faith and Practice.

Wednesdays: 7.00 - 9.30 P.M.

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Christian faith has always been practiced in the context of other religious traditions. There is a long history of Christian relationship to almost all the religious traditions of the world. Over the past several decades, however, there is a new awareness of religious plurality. With increased population movements, people in almost all parts of the world are challenged to live as neighbors with people who follow religious traditions other than their own. Recent rise of militant expressions of religion has increased the interest in knowing more about religious traditions, their beliefs and practices and their role in contemporary society.

This is an outline course that seeks to give a broad understanding of the major religious traditions through an attempt to grasp their basic beliefs and practices, and through visits to the respective religious communities in their places of worship. An effort to understand the history and the issues in Christian relationship to these religious traditions is also built into the course. The required readings as well as the class work can only hope to open up an interest in these religious traditions. It is hoped that interested students would do wider reading beyond what is required by the course and would learn more by actual contact and dialogue with people of other religious traditions in their respective communities. There is no better way to learn about our neighbors.

The main text for the course is ***Our Religions*** by Arvind Sharma. The strength of this volume is that the chapters on different religious traditions are written by scholars who practice that particular faith. Readings from "***A New Religious America***" by Diana Eck gives the reality of each of these religious traditions in the American context. Where necessary there are also additional readings.

COURSE OUTLINE

Sept. 7

General introduction to the Course, Readings, Course Requirements, and Visits to places of worship.

Introduction to the study of religions as faith-systems.

Traditional Religions: **Religion of the Native Peoples.**

14th HINDUISM

Preparatory readings:

"Our Religions" p. 2 - 67.

"New Religious America" p. 80 - 141

Hinduism: Its origins, history, main branches, and basic beliefs.
Contemporary developments, Hinduism in America.

21st HINDUISM (CONT.)

Devotional Hinduism: Temples, Images, Rituals and Pilgrimages.
Issues in Hindu-Christian relations
Reading: "Darsan: Seeing the Divine Image in India"

28th Visit to the Hindu temple

OCT.

5th BUDDHISM

Preparatory readings:
"Our Religions" p. 71 - 137.
"New Religious America" p. 142 - 221.
Origins of Buddhism; Buddha the teacher, Basic teachings.

12th Reading Week (No class)

FIRST ASSIGNMENT DUE ON 19th. OCT:

TOPIC: "A Critical Assessment of the Hindu and Buddhist ideas of Reincarnation."

19th BUDDHISM (cont.)

Plurality of Buddhism, Buddhist practices, Buddhism in America.
Buddhism through exposure to Buddhist monastic life (Video).
Reading: "What the Buddha Taught"

26th SIKHISM and JAINISM

The rise of Sikhism; Guru Nanak the teacher; Sikh beliefs.
Sikhism in America; The impact of Asian religions on America.
Preparatory readings: Search and read on Sikhism and Jainism in the Internet

Nov. 2nd. Visit to the Sikh Temple

9th CONFUCIANISM AND RELIGIONS OF NOTRH ASIA

Reading: "Our Religions" p. 141 -227.
Confucius, his teachings and its impact on East Asia.
Taoism and Shintoism.

16th JUDAISM

Preparatory readings:
"Our Religions" p. 239 - 355.
Basic Jewish beliefs, observances, and festivals; Branches of
Judaism in America.

Video on Jewish prayer life and celebration of the Sabbath.
Issues in Jewish-Christian relations.

23rd Thanksgiving (No class)

30th ISLAM

Preparatory readings:

“Our Religions” p. 427 - 532.

“New Religious America” p. 222 - 293.

“Islam, Christianity and the West - A Troubled History”

Rise of Islam; Mohammad the Prophet; Basic teachings of Islam.

Understanding Islam through its basic practices. (Video)

Issues in Christian-Muslim relations

DEC. 7th Christianity and Other Religions.

Outline of the history of Christian relationship to other religious traditions; the rise of interfaith dialogue; kinds of dialogue; principles of dialogue; dialogue related documents.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Attendance and participation in the discussions

Four to five pages reflection paper due on Oct. 19.

A Project Report

In addition to the field trips, each student is expected to get in touch with a religious community other than their own during the course of the semester in order to produce a project report of about 15 pages on the specific community chosen for study during the semester. The project should be based on:

- Background reading of the history of the specific community and their place of worship in the New Jersey or New York area.
- A number of visits to the community to participate in their worship life as appropriate;
- Interviews with members of the religious community concerned.

The Project Report should contain the following:

- History of the specific place of worship and the community attached to it.
- Activities carried out by the student as part of the project.
- The programs and activities carried out by the community as part of their worship and community life.
- Issues and concerns faced by the community in practicing their tradition in the USA.
- General evaluation, and reflections on the impact of the project on the student.

(A separate paper would be distributed in class on how to contact religious communities and the sensitivities that must be respected in carrying out the project.)

REQUIRED BOOKS: (other sources will be indicated in the class as we deal with each religious tradition)

1. Arvind Sharma (Ed.), *Our Religions*, Harper San Francisco, 1993 (Paper back)
2. Diana Eck, *A New Religious America*, Harper Collins, 2001, (0-06-062159-1) pbk.
3. Rollin Armour, Sr. *Islam, Christianity, and the West- A Troubled History*, Orbis, 2002, (1-57075-407-1) paper.
4. Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught, (Revised and Expanded Edition)*, Grove Press, 1974, (0-8021-3031-3)
5. Diana L. Eck, *Darsan, Seeing the Divine Image in India*, Anima Books, 1981. (0-89012-024-2)

Instructions on the Semester Project Report.

- Your final paper (project report) should emerge from an encounter that you have had with a religious community other than your own during the course of this semester. This normally means that you will have to visit a specific religious community a few times to get the material necessary for your paper.
- Your paper could relate to a Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh, Muslim, Jewish, Native American or any other religious group that does not draw its primary inspiration from the Christian tradition. Please speak to me if you are in doubt whether the community you had chosen is acceptable for the final project report.
- The essay, not less than 10 and not longer than 15 pages, should normally contain three sections. First (about 5 pages) some background information of the religion itself and why you have chosen to study it. Second, a description of how you went about the project indicating the persons, places and events that you covered, and third, what you have found out about the particular community, its origins, its structure, its experience of being a religious community in the United States, the kind of programs they have for their followers and their outreach, and the issues they face etc., ending with your own evaluation of the situation.
- It is permissible to do a group project made up of no more than four persons, but please talk with me before you undertake a group project.

How to go about it?

You may already know of a religious community in your area. If so, please do your project on that community. If you do not know any religious community or where they may be located, go into the Internet and search under the name of the religious community you are looking for. You would find a long list of possibilities, and choose one that is most convenient for you.

Go directly to the place of worship or telephone the person in charge directly and introduce yourself. Tell the person that you are studying their religious tradition in

class and that you would like to know more about their community and their worship life. Fix the first appointment, and later on go as often as you need to. If the first experience is negative, chose a different place for your project.

Most of the religious communities will welcome you and would be happy to know that you are studying their religious tradition. With their permission you may also attend one or more of their worship events and also hold informal conversations or formal interviews with some of the worshippers.

Most places of worship in the USA would have literature about their place, their history, the kinds of program they have, and News Letters. They may also have websites that gives this information. Collect these for they would provide you with valuable information for your project.

Make sure that you do not ask questions that might lead to the suspicion that you may be collecting information for the government or other intelligence agencies. For instance you do not ask in the Muslim place of worship questions like “What are your connections outside your country?” or “Are you funded by people outside for your mission?” or “What is your attitude to terrorism?” These may be valid questions, but in the present atmosphere they are likely to be misunderstood. Your questions must show that you have a genuine interest to know and learn about the religious tradition, its ministry, its experience of being a religious community in the USA and the issues they face as a religious community.

If you want to tape any conversation please ask their permission first.

Submission of the essay.

Do not wait to begin the project in April. It would be too late, because there would be many delays in getting appointments etc. Do not leave your name and ask them to call back. Most Asian religious leaders are happier to deal with you in person than on the telephone. Begin your project in about three weeks into the semester (it is independent of what we learn in class). Hand it in as soon as you have completed it. The last possible date for submission is April 28. If the paper is not in by April 28 you will need to file an ‘Incomplete’ with the Registrar’s Office.

The previous classes have found the project they undertook very stimulating and rewarding. It took away the hesitation they have had in meeting people of other religious and cultural origins. All of them were warmly received by the community they had approached for their project. You too will find it an enriching experience.