

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS
Philosophy 2070.001
Introduction to Great Religions of the World

Summer II 2006
M - Th 12:00 - 1:50 p.m.
ENV 391

Dr. George James
Office: EESAT 225e
Hours: M – Tues 4:00 -5:00
and by appointment

Scope of the Course:

The purpose of this course is neither to convert you to any particular religion nor to persuade you to reject any or all religion. It is to enable you to achieve an *informed appreciation* for the religious life of humankind. Achieving such an informed appreciation is likely to be a challenge both to persons who are committed to a particular religious tradition and to persons unfamiliar with any. Nevertheless we hope to achieve this goal by through an exploration of some of the most influential religious traditions in the world. If we look at this material with the assumption that all religions are a distortion of reality, or that *all but one* are a distortion of reality we preclude in advance a fair hearing of the insights these traditions have to offer. If, on the other hand, we assume without examination that all religions are equal, we are unlikely to take seriously the uniqueness of the claims of many traditions to a unique revelation. The attitude appropriate to this subject matter is one of genuine intellectual curiosity. We want to *appreciate*, not believe, the *understanding of reality* and the *understanding of the human condition* embodied in these traditions. The question of the *truth* of religion should be placed within brackets until we achieve an understanding of the claims of the religion in question.

In order to achieve an informed appreciation for the differing religious traditions we need first to formulate a working definition of our subject. The purpose of a definition is to become clear about what it is that we are seeking to explore. An adequate definition of religion must be faithful to the religious tradition with which we are most familiar from our own religious training and experience if we have had such training and experience, and it must be faithful to all those forms of behavior we would all recognize as religion that are not a part of our experience. If, for instance, we were to define religion as "belief in God" or "belief in the supernatural," we should be prepared to show (1) that *all* religions involve *beliefs*, and (2) that among these beliefs there is a universal doctrine of God or the supernatural. In fact there are many historical traditions that we would all recognize as religions that are without specific beliefs and there are religions that have certain beliefs which include the rejection of any doctrine of God. In order to help us formulate a definition of religion that is faithful to the available data, we will consider the insights offered in a short book by Paul Tillich called *The Dynamics of Faith*.

Having formulated a workable definition of our subject, it will then be necessary to become familiar with the most influential traditions of religions life that we find in the history of human civilization. This will entail the exploration of a considerable body of information concerning the manifestations of religion in human history. This will include information from cultures and historical epochs very different from our own. Our purpose in examining this material will be to begin to understand its significance not for us, but for the lives of the adherents of these religious traditions. The information now available concerning the religious life of mankind, however, is far too vast for even a lifetime to comprehend. Thus the material

we will examine will be necessarily cursory and selective. Nevertheless, it will include a span of data sufficient to engender an appreciation of the great variety of the forms of religious life that exist in the world, as well as those pervasive features of such phenomena.

The material we will turn to first will focus upon the religion of Africa. Classroom lectures in this part of the course will be supplemented by the reading of *African Religions and Philosophy* by J. S. Mbiti, a specialist in African religion, and by the reading of the contemporary novel *Things Fall Apart* by the renowned Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe. In our study of African religion, we will also seek to understand the principal features of African religion that appear in other religious traditions, including your own.

Following our study of African religion, we will turn to one of the great religious traditions of human history. It contains some of the elements of religious life we found in Africa, but also incorporates sophisticated philosophical and mystical traditions. The second subject of our study will be Hinduism. Our study of the Hindu religious tradition will also provide background for an appreciation of Jainism, Buddhism, and the Sikh religious tradition. Your reading for this part of the course will include the relevant Chapters of *The World's Religions* by Huston Smith.

Following our introduction to Hinduism and related traditions we will turn briefly to the traditions of East Asia, and especially of Buddhism. The lectures you will hear on these subjects will be supplemented by your reading of relevant chapters from *The World's Religions* by Huston Smith. Following our treatment of these traditions, we shall be looking at the prophetic tradition that appears in the religion of Ancient Israel, the development of early Christianity, early Rabbinic Judaism, and Islam. Our study of Islam will explore the distinctive features of the Muslim tradition, and the role it has played in traditional life in the Middle East, and in social and political movements in the world today. The course will conclude with an effort to draw together a general conception of religion on the basis of the data we have encountered in the course of the semester.

Requirements:

1. Your understanding of the issues of this course will require a genuine encounter with the material presented in the lectures and discussed in class. This cannot occur if you are absent from class. Class attendance is required. Because of considerations of time, your instructor will take attendance intermittently in the course of the semester. This will provide a fairly accurate record not of absences but of persons who have had perfect or near perfect attendance. Bonus points of 5 points will be added to the semester score of persons who have had perfect or near perfect attendance.

2. An informed appreciation for the religions of the world can occur only if you conscientiously apply yourself to the reading material assigned. Please read the material with care and think about the ideas being offered. Compare as much as possible the information you are hearing about the religion you are studying with your own knowledge of the religion, if any, in which you were raised. Try imaginatively to enter into the world of this religion. Leave aside for the moment the question whether this religion is right or wrong. Focus instead on the *meaning* it seems to have for the adherents of the religion in question.

3. The lecture and reading material you will encounter will be supplemented by important audio-visual presentations. These are intended to provide a window on the actual life of the religion in question. Such presentations will include video tapes, and may include slides which your teacher has accumulated in the course of his travels in Asia. Most of this material will be presented in class. Some may be assigned for your viewing in the media library outside of class.

4. The course will be divided for the purpose of organization into 5 major parts. There will be an exam over each of these parts in the course of the semester. Most of these will be "in house" exams; some *may be* "take home" exams. Some may have a part to be taken home and another part to be answered in class. Most will consist of two parts, one focusing upon matters of fact, the other focusing on your personal and intellectual response to the religion you are studying in the light of your own personal experience. There will be 5 major weekly exams in the course of the semester. Each of the weekly exams that occur in the course of the semester will be worth about 20 points toward a total of 100 points for the course. Normally these will be given on the Thursday of each week of the course, during the second hour of our classroom session. In addition to these exams short unannounced quizzes on the reading for the week may be given at any time. They will be worth about 5 bonus points each. The points earned from such "pop quizzes" may make the difference between an "A" and a "B" or between passing and failing the course. The final exam will be over only the last week of the course. Careful preparation for the weekly exams will be critical to achieving a good grade for the course. There will be no "extra credit" papers or assignments in this course.

Grades:

Grades will be based upon the quality of class participation, the results of exams and quizzes, and your instructor's subjective evaluation of the level of informed appreciation you have achieved.

Textbooks:

Books for the course are available at the University Book Store, Voertman's, and North Texas Book and Supply:

John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 2nd Edition (Portsmouth NH: Heinemann) 1990

Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, (New York: Bantam Doubleday) 1959

Huston Smith, *The World's Religions*, (New York: Harper Collins) 1991

Paul Tillich, *The Dynamics of Faith*, (New York: Harper Collins) 1957

Drop Policy:

Students in this course are permitted to drop the course at any time until the last day to drop the course with consent of the instructor. That date is Wednesday August 2, 2006.

Approximate Schedule of Topics and Reading Assignments:

Week of:

- July 10 Introduction: What is Religion? The Symbolic Expression of Religious Faith: Paul Tillich, *The Dynamics of Faith*, pp. 1-54. (First exam Thursday).
- July 17 Traditional African Religion: The African Ontology and the African Concept of Time; the African Regard for Ancestors, the Living Dead, the Deities, and God: J. S. Mbiti, *African Religion and Philosophy*, pp. 1-89. African Religion in Life: Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*. (Second exam Thursday).
- July 24 The Origins of the Hindu Religious Tradition; The Hindu View of Life; Medieval Devotional Hinduism; Hinduism Today: Huston Smith, *The World's Religions*, "Hinduism." (Third exam Thursday).
- July 31 Buddhism as Philosophy and Religion: Early Buddhist Thought; The Mahayana Tradition; Buddhism in China and Japan: Huston Smith, *The World's Religions*, "Buddhism." (Fourth exam Thursday). Wednesday August 2 is the last day to drop the course with instructors permission.
- Aug 7 Religion in the Ancient Near East; The Origins of the Islamic Faith; The Five Pillars of Islam; Islamic Institutions and Law; Islamic Mysticism: Huston Smith, *The World's Religions*, "Islam."
Final Exam: Friday August 11, 2006 12:00-1:50pm