

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

Spring 2009
MWF 10:00 - 10:50 p.m.
EESAT 391

Dr. George James
Office: EESAT 225e
Hours: M W 3:00
-4:00 p.m. *and by
appointment*

Scope of the Course:

The purpose of this course is to assist you in achieving an *informed appreciation* for the religious life of humankind as this is reflected in some of the most influential religious traditions in the world. It is intended neither to convert you to any particular religion nor to persuade you to reject any or all religions. But to achieve an informed appreciation for this material it is necessary to approach the material with the right frame of mind. If you approach this material with the assumption that all religion but your own is wrong, is nonsense, is a distortion of reality, you are unlikely to achieve a fair hearing of the insights that have given birth to these traditions, or the ideas and practices that have shaped the lives of the human beings who for millennia have participated in these traditions. Assuming such a standpoint, we can hardly hope to be properly informed. If, on the other hand, we assume that all religions are essentially the same, we are unlikely to take seriously the uniqueness of each tradition or the claims that many traditions make to a unique revelation. The attitude appropriate to this subject matter is one of genuine curiosity about the nature of religion and the distinguishing features of the many differing traditions. We want to appreciate the *understanding of reality* and the *understanding of the human condition* they embody. It is appropriate to place the question of the *truth* of religions within brackets until an adequate understanding of the religions in question is achieved.

In order to achieve an informed appreciation of differing religious traditions we need first to formulate a *working definition* of our subject. The purpose of a definition is to become clear in our minds about what it is that we are seeking to explore. It is a preliminary exercise that can be revised over time. An adequate definition of religion would have to be faithful to the religious tradition with which you are familiar from your own religious training and experience if you have had such experience and training, but it must also be faithful to all those forms of behavior we would all recognize as religion that are not a part of your experience. For instance: if 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 preliminary definition of our subject, we need then to become familiar with the most influential traditions of religions life that we find in

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 is to begin to grasp the understanding of reality embedded in these traditions and the significance of this understanding of reality for the adherents of these religious traditions. The information now available concerning the religious traditions of humankind, however, is too vast to encompass even in a lifetime. Thus the material we examine will be necessarily cursory and selective. Nevertheless, it will include a span of material 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 that justify our referring to them all as *religions*.

The material we 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 African 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 that contains some of the elements of religious life we found in Africa, but also incorporates a sophisticated literary, intellectual, and mystical tradition. Our second subject of 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. 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 the nature 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 repeatedly absent from class.
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, true or false. 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 videos, and perhaps some 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. Some 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 4 major exams in the course of the semester. Each of the exams that occur in the course of the semester will be worth about 15 points toward a total of 100 points for the course. The final exam will be worth about 40 points, and will cover the last of the topics we will study as well as a comprehensive review of the work of the semester. In addition to these exams short unannounced quizzes over 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 include some questions of fact concerning all of the religious traditions we have encountered in the course of the semester.

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.

Attendance Policy:

Students are expected to be in attendance in class, *every class session*, unless prevented by accident or serious illness. While the instructor cannot maintain records for every absence, attendance records are kept on the basis of occasional attendance checks. The result is that at the end of the semester the instructor does not have a record of absences, but a fairly accurate record of students whose attendance is perfect or nearly perfect. A record of perfect or near perfect attendance will be considered in the calculation of final grades, and may be crucial when the result of other material puts the student on the margin of a grade category. The presumption is that if all your absences are the result of serious injury or illness they will be rare and your record of attendance will be nearly perfect. *Please do not bother me with excuses.*

Policy on Absences from Exams:

If you are absent from any major exams because of accident or serious illness, arrangements for a makeup exam will be made only on receipt of a letter or other notification from the appropriate medical authority. There are no makeup exams for unannounced quizzes.

Policy on Grades of I (Incomplete):

A grade of "I" will be given for the course only in the case of extenuating circumstances such as accident or serious illness that make it impossible to complete all the course requirements on time.

Drop Policy:

A student may drop the course with instructor's permission until the last day allowed by the university to drop the course with instructor's permission. That day is Tuesday March 31 2009.

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

Approximate Schedule of Topics and Reading Assignments:

Week of:

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| Jan | 19 | Introduction: What is Religion? Paul Tillich, <i>The Dynamics of Faith</i> , pp. 30-40, Huston Smith <i>The World's Religions</i> , pp. 1-11. |
| | 26 | A Provisional Definition of Religion: Tillich, pp. 30-41 |
| Feb | 2 | The Symbolic Expression of Religious Faith: Tillich, pp. 41-54 (first exam). |
| | 9 | The Traditional Religion of Africa: The African Ontology and the African concept of Time, <i>African Religions and Philosophy</i> , pp. 1 – 28, 74 – 89. |
| | 16 | The Africa Regard for Ancestors, the Living Dead, the deities and God <i>African Religion and Philosophy</i> , pp. 107 – 161. |

- 23 The Traditional Religion of Africa continued: Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*. All pages.(second exam).
- Mar 2 The Origins of the Hindu Religious Tradition: Huston Smith, *The World's Religions*. "Hinduism" pp. 12 – 50.
- 9 The Hindu View of Life: Huston Smith, *The World's Religions*. pp. 50 - 77.
- 16 Spring Break
- 23 Medieval Devotional Hinduism and the Origin of the Sikh Religion: Hand out. (third exam).
- 30 Buddhism as Philosophy and Religion: Early Buddhist Thought, Huston Smith, "Buddhism." pp. 82 – 119.
- Apr. 6 Confucianism, Taoism, and the Religions of East Asia: Huston Smith, pp. 154 - 218.
- 13 Buddhism: The Mahayana Tradition: Huston Smith, pp. 119 – 149 (fourth exam).
- 20 Religion in the Ancient Near East, the Hebrews and the Origins of the Christian Faith: Huston Smith, pp. 271 - 362.
- 27 The Origins of the Islamic Faith, The Five Pillars of Islam, and their Implications for Human Order: Huston Smith, pp. 221 – 257.
- May 4 Pre-Finals Week: Islamic Mysticism and related topics: Huston Smith, pp. 257 – 268.
- 11 Final Exam Week: The Final Exam is Monday May 11, 2009, 8:00 a.m. - 10:00 a.m.