

EMMANUEL CHRISTIAN INSTITUTE, INC.

WORLD RELIGIONS

COURSE SYLLABUS

2018-2019 Academic Year

Instructor: TBA

For additional information:

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Course Information

Course Title	Credit	Hours	Semester	Date/Time
WORLD RELIGIONS		3	Spring, 2019	7-10:00 PM Tuesdays

Course Description:

The historical origins, central teachings, and devotional practices of the major religious traditions- Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—are considered in relation to common themes of human experience: the holy or sacred, evil and suffering, love and compassion, wisdom and justice, death and deliverance and current world events. Interpretive skills appropriate to religious studies will be explored through opportunities to write descriptive and critical essays.

Course Objectives:

The goals of the course are: 1) to impart understanding of the essential doctrines and institutions of the world's major religious traditions, stressing their founding and normative principles; 2) to identify similarities and differences of thought and practice among the traditions; and 3) to clarify and articulate one's own religious attitudes and orientations in the context of comparative study.

Learning Outcomes:

Students will be able to articulate their own definition of "religion", not just based on their own personal beliefs but from having viewed the world temporarily from someone else's theological perspective and worldview. Students will be able to identify similarities and differences of thought and practice among the various major traditions. And, the students will learn the basic principles of each faith in order that they may gain the ability to discuss each religion and with respect to its history, practice and relationship to other faiths.

Assessment/Evaluation Methods:

Students are required to submit a total of 4 essays (5-6 pages each):

ESSAY 1: Religion and the Interpreter

Part I Describe your religious background, affiliation, or outlook. State what you hope to gain by a study of world religions.

Part II Define what you mean by "religion." Offer a working definition which may be revised as the course develops. Discuss the elements of your definition and why you chose them.

In the study of religion it is customary for the scholar to set aside or "bracket" his or her own beliefs when studying a foreign tradition. The idea is to view the world temporarily from another's perspective. This task is difficult, but it is even harder for someone who has not reflected upon her or his own religious outlook. And while it is not "anyone's guess," it is important that you, as a writer on religion, indicate what you mean when using the term.

ESSAY 2: Devotion to God

Devotion (*bhakti*) to God animates many selections from Hindu scriptures in our anthology (Fisher and Bailey, pp. 62-90). Yet the style of devotion and the nature of the devotee's relationship to God may vary a great deal, depending on the manifestation of the divine being (god, goddess, spirit or force) that is being invoked. Your task in this essay is to choose one such expression of devotion and to convey its essence or flavor to the reader.

Part I Choose a passage from the anthology that reflects a feeling of praise, worship, or devotion to God. Quote several lines from the text and then identify the type of scripture (e.g. hymn, *sruti*, *smrti*, *sutra*, *saint song*) and its origins, use in ritual, social settings, age. (Consult LR as well as AR here.) What form of God is praised in the poem or song? What literary figures or style is used here to express devotion? Don't forget to cite author, title, page for all quotes, even from the course texts.

Part II Based on this passage, what can you learn about the relationship between the devotee and God? Does God reward the devotee for his/her devotion, or is the act of devotion its own reward? What qualities does this aspect of God manifest, and what qualities does the devotee summon to praise and serve this aspect of God? Would it be appropriate to speak of "salvation" or "liberation"?

Part III How does the religious outlook contained in this text compare to your own? (Refer back to your first essay.) If some aspects of this outlook may be compatible with your worldview, and some may not be, explain how. Do the teachings of Hinduism exemplify your definition of religion? Explain.

ESSAY 3: Encounter with Mystery

Religions express the mystery of life and the reality of the sacred through poetry, metaphors, paradoxes, objects (e.g. *the cross*), gestures, architecture – even silence. The Hindu sound *Om*; the *smile of the Buddha* and the teachings of no-self (*anatta*), emptiness (*shunyata*); the *humor* of Chuang Tzu in expressing “the way” (*tao*) and “not-doing” (*wu-wei*); and the *miracles* of the Bible – all point to *powers or relationships that are invisible or transcend conventional speech or logic*.

Part I Choose an example of symbolic expression from one of the traditions we have studied (not your own). Describe the symbol, gesture, or object, and give some background: its origin and place in the tradition. Quote authorities, give examples, and identify your sources with proper citations.

Part II How does such a mode of expression work to produce *a state of mind and or style of behavior* for those who use it? What seems to be the purpose and impact of this symbol or teaching?

Part III What do you find appealing or unappealing about this symbol? Have you ever experienced the mystery of life that it points to? Are you drawn to such ways of expressing mystery?

Or do you hold that such indirect modes of expression obscure the truth about life and the world?

ESSAY 4: Religion: Punishment or Refuge?

In *Letter to a Christian Nation*, Sam Harris presents religion (not only American Christianity) as irrational, obsolete, and guilty of great harm in the world. Harris questions not only the failings of contemporary religious believers and institutions, but the very beliefs that inspire religious life.

Part I Identify three strong arguments that Harris makes against the Abrahamic traditions – Christianity, Judaism, and Islam – stating the argument in your own words and citing evidence that Harris offers for each of these attacks on religious faith or practice.

Part II Choosing examples from the Abrahamic traditions in LR and AR, answer Harris's criticisms. Bearing in mind that the purpose of the course is to emphasize the positive value of religion, use the texts to show of the benefits of religious faith and practice.

Part III Drawing from the essays in "Subverting Hatred," show how a specific religious teaching or practice (perhaps purged of the flaws Harris targets) might contribute to the *easing of tension or the reduction of violence in the world today*. Show how this teaching or practice might be made acceptable to persons of any background. You may make references to any tradition we have studied in the course.

Final Examination

The final examination offers you a chance to sum up your study of world religions. The exam consists of short answers (*identify/define terms with a sentence or two, identify the setting and key concepts represented by passages from sacred texts*), and short essays on interpretive questions we have explored throughout the course. A review sheet will be provided toward the end of the course.

Teaching/Learning Methods:

This course will be taught via lectures, videos, and open class discussions. Guest speakers will also be in attendance to make relevant presentations.

Grading/Other Policies and Expectations

Letter Grade Percentages

100%-90% = A

89%-80% = B

79%-70% = C

69%-60% = D

59% - Below = F

Policy for Class Attendance and Course Assignments

- 1) Course grades will be based on four graded essays and a final examination, each worth 20 percent.
- 2) All students are required to attend ECI's Annual Convocation and Worship Service.
- 3) Regular class attendance is required. No more than two unexcused absences are allowed. In case of an emergency, it is the responsibility of the student to obtain any missed assignments and/or pertinent information when absent.
- 4) Late assignments will only be accepted in extreme cases and will be docked one letter grade for each day it is late.
- 5) Please be on time for class. If you are tardy on exam day you may lose the opportunity to take your exam.
- 6) Leaving class early without pre-arranging it with the instructor will count as a class absence.
- 7) All students are expected to act responsively and respectfully in class. The use of cell phones, texting, talking in class, and/or disrespectful behavior will not be tolerated.

Required Readings

Mary Pat Fisher, *Living Religions* (ninth edition, 2013) "LR"

Fisher and Bailey, *Anthology of Living Religions* (3rd ed., 2011) "AR"

Smith-Christopher, *Subverting Hatred: Nonviolence in Religious Traditions* (2007) "SH"

Sam Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation* (2008) "LCN"

Supplemental/Additional Bibliography

Course Outline and Scheduling

Session 1 Introduction to course, study of religions	LR 1-32; AR 1-2
Session 2 Myth and ritual in the primal religions <i>Film:</i> "Sacred Trances in Bali and Java"	LR 33-70; SH Intro & 5 Essay 1 due
Session 3 Hinduism and Yoga. <i>Film:</i> "330 Million Gods"	LR 71-96; AR 3
Session 4 Hinduism: Paths of action, knowledge, and devotion	LR 97-120; SH 4
Session 5 Early Buddhism. <i>Film:</i> "Footprint of the Buddha" The Three Refuges: Buddha, Dharma, Sangha	LR 137-157; AR 5 Essay 2 draft due
Session 6 Mahayana Buddhism: Pure Land and Zen Sects Religions of divine grace and self-reliance	LR 158-186; SH 3
Session 7 Confucian civic virtue, Taoist natural piety Religion and secularity in China today	LR 6; AR 6 SH 3; Essay 2 due

Session 8 Hebrew/Israelite Religion: Covenant and Presence Patriarchs, prophets, and sages of ancient Israel	LR 246-280; AR 199-221 SH 7
Session 9 Judaism and the Holocaust: Film: "The Chosen People" Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and beyond	LR 281-300; AR 222-234 Essay 3 draft due
Session 10 Life and Teachings through the eyes of the Early Church	Christian origins: Jesus' LR 302-333; AR 235-251 SH 8
Session 11 and the Protestant Reformation; Trends in American Christianity	Medieval Christendom LR 334-376; AR 252-273 LCN vii-91; Essay 3 due
Session 12 Mohammad--Life and Mission Sufi mysticism and Shi'ite fundamentalism	Islam: Prophet LR 377-407; AR 275-315 SH 6 Essay 4 due; LR 408-432
Session 13 modernity, and pluralism: Convergence or clash of religious cultures today?	Modernity, post- LR 396-520; AR 352-373 SH Epilogue
Session 14	Final Examination