

# RELG 101 Exploring Religions

## Instructor: Scott Reeves

### **Introduction:**

Just when we start to figure out this incredible but often difficult thing called life, we die. And we have this inbuilt notion that it just isn't right. That nagging notion, when we listen to it, raises serious questions: What is the point of life in the first place and where did it come from? Is there something after death? Why is it that our human mind is troubled by such things and tends to aspire to something beyond? How do the answers to those questions impact my life today...or do they?

Such questions are at the heart of the religious instinct common to all of humanity. In fact, the premise of this class is that people are essentially religious. Whether we take religion to be a transcendent glimpse into some ultimate reality or a chemical glitch in the human brain, the ubiquity of religious belief and experience is a reality that has impacted every human life. Therefore, it behooves us—especially within a pluralistic setting—to be literate in the basic beliefs and practices of major world religions.

To gain a better understanding of these traditions we will take a journey of sorts through time and around the world. Of course it is easier to map a journey if we know where we are starting. Our journey begins with a brief critical discussion of our own secular/pluralistic sense of the world. The basic flow of the course will move through 4 units: (1) an introductory look at our modern secular milieu and a brief discussion of why and how we will study religion; (2) an overview of the Eastern religions with a focus on Hinduism and Buddhism; (3) a detailed overview of the Western/Abrahamic faiths of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam; and (4) a very short discussion on navigating the complexities of religious belief and unbelief in a secular/pluralist world.

### **Requirements:**

**Reading.** Thorough and attentive reading (and sometimes watching) is essential. This is an introductory course, which means there are no prerequisites and every effort will be made to explain the subject matter as simply and straightforwardly as possible; on the other hand, the teachings of the world's religions are far from simplistic, and studying—not just skimming—the assigned material is crucial for success. Readings and resources will include key texts from the source material as well as writings from the great saints, teachers, and artists within the traditions. These will also be supplemented with historical and social/cultural information from secondary sources and documentaries.

**Quizzes.** There will at least 12 quizzes over the course of the semester based on the daily reading assignments. The top 10 quiz scores will count for 40% of your final grade. Any

student who earns a perfect score on 12 quizzes (not just 10) will receive a 5% bonus on their final exam. A quiz can be given during the Tuesday and/or Thursday meeting for the week and at any time during class.

**Examinations.** There will also be two examinations: a midterm (25% of your final grade), and a final (35% of the final grade); the exams presuppose familiarity with the readings as well as content from class lectures and discussion.

**Attendance,** both prompt and regular. Missing classes can negatively impact your grade in three ways: (1) you could miss the weekly quiz, (2) you could miss important information for your exams, and (3) you lose the opportunity to actively participate.

**Participation.** There will be ample time for discussion in class and on blackboard. Although there is no grade as such for class participation, constructive contributions on a regular basis can help to raise a student's final course grade significantly. Regular and thoughtful participation can earn up to 5% bonus on each exam.

*Extra Credit. There will be NO EXTRA CREDIT available beyond the possible bonus points mentioned above for excellence on quizzes and participation.*

**Grading Scale** (read above for details)

100-90 A ; 89-87 B+ ; 86-80 B ; 79-77 C+ ; 76-70 C ; 69-67 D+ ; 66-60 D ; 59 and below F

Final grade based on: 40% top 10 quiz grades, 25% midterm, and 35% final.

### **Learning Objectives**

**Students who successfully complete this course should be able to:**

- i. Recognize and describe the key ideas and practices of several religious traditions
- ii. demonstrate familiarity with key people and/or texts from each of the major world religions covered in the course.
- iii. Read religious texts critically and analyze and compare specific examples of religious discourse
- iv. discuss the idea of religion as such (not simply the varieties of religious belief and practice) and the impact of modern secularization and pluralization on religion and religions.
- v. Explain the main approaches, methods, and critical terms in the academic study of religion, and identify current issues and debates in the field

- vi. Discuss the ways in which human behavior is shaped by beliefs in a divine being or beings, spirits, ancestors, or other non-empirical agents
- vii. Analyze and compare specific examples of religious social formation
- viii. Articulate their own perspective on the current issues under examination and discuss the strengths and limitations of that perspective
- ix. Engage deeply and respectfully with views other than their own.

## **Course Policies**

### ***Attendance***

Prompt and regular attendance is crucial for success in the course. As noted above, absences will negatively affect your grade. If you are absent for an excusable reason and miss a quiz, be sure to present the needed documentation to the instructor immediately upon your return (e.g., if you are absent for a legitimate medical reason, bring a doctor's note as soon as you come back to class). The professor is reasonable; you may discuss with him in private any special circumstances affecting your attendance, preferably before missing any class.

### ***Expectations for Classroom Behavior***

We are all here to learn. Please come to class prepared and on-time. Always be respectful of everyone in class. Please do not bring or create any distractions to class including distractions stemming from phones and laptops. Phones are to be off, and laptop computers are to be used for note-taking and for following along with PDF of readings only. Any disrespectful or disruptive behavior may result in dismissal from class and/or an academic penalty.

### ***Academic Integrity***

Assignments and examination work are expected to be the sole effort of the student submitting the work. Students are expected to follow the University of South Carolina Honor Code and should expect that every instance of a suspected violation will be reported. Students found responsible for violations of the Code will be subject to academic penalties under the Code in addition to whatever disciplinary sanctions are applied. Cheating on a test or copying someone else's work will result in a 0 for the work, possibly a grade of F in the course, and, in accordance with University policy, will be referred to the University Committee for Academic Responsibility and may result in expulsion from the University.

### ***Accommodating Disabilities***

Reasonable accommodations are available for students with a documented disability. If you have a disability and may need accommodations to fully participate in this class, contact the Office of Student Disability Services: 777-6142, TDD 777-6744, email [sasds@mailbox.sc.edu](mailto:sasds@mailbox.sc.edu), or stop by LeConte College Room 112A. All accommodations must be approved through the Office of

Student Disability Services. Please take the initiative and arrange to see the professor in private to set up specific accommodations for a disability.

### ***Contacting the Professor***

The best way to contact me is via email: [reevests@email.sc.edu](mailto:reevests@email.sc.edu). Please allow 24 hours for response. If you have not heard back in 24 hours you may leave a message at the Religious Studies Office above the Rutledge Chapel or by calling 777-4100.

## **Unit Overview (Readings provided online):**

### **Unit One: Bias, Truth, and Ways of Knowing.**

“Billions and Billions of Demons” by Richard Lewontin

“Only Begetter of Truth” by John Brewer Eberly, Jr.

Excerpts from *The Everlasting Man* by G. K. Chesterton

“Meditation in a Tool Shed” by C. S. Lewis

Articles from Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (online) “Phenomenology” and “Phenomenology of Religion”

“Paths and Perspectives” by James Cutsinger

### **Unit Two: Eastern Religions**

#### Hinduism

“What is not here is nowhere else...”: Central ideas and primary deities. Dharma, Samsara, etc. Synopsis of the Mahabharata

Fulfilling Dharma: the four yogas. Bhagavad Gita

Hinduism or Hinduisms? Polytheism or Monism. Katha Upanishad

#### Buddhism

Foundation of a Revolution. *The Buddha* (Documentary)

Philosophy or Religion. *Seven Wonders of the Buddhist World* (Documentary)

Nobel Truths and the Eight-fold Path: “The Deer Park Sermon”

Escaping the burning house. Selected Koans

### **Unit Three: Abrahamic Traditions**

Monotheism, Henotheism, and Polytheism

Various Creation Myths

Judaism: Foundation, core, and historical development

Foundational Stories of the Hebrew People. Readings from Genesis, Exodus, and Deuteronomy.

Providence and struggle as the central realities. Readings from Exodus, Jeremiah, Job, Daniel, and Esther.

Timeline and historical excerpts on late antiquity and the canonization of Hebrew scriptures as well as information on “The Great Assembly.”

The beginnings of Rabbinic Judaism

Christianity: the Jewish root, the living Word, the new people

Jewish sources and internal conflicts discussed in light of the Gospel of Luke.

The living Word a Jewish reality; reading excerpts from John and Philo.

The new people; readings from Acts and early church fathers.

Established faith? Athanasius contra mundum.

Islam: History, Divisions, and a shared core

Biography of Muhammad (Documentary)

Three Part documentary on the Caliph

Five Pillars of Islam: Excerpts from the Quran

The Sixth Pillar: Jihad (Sura 9), the Struggle

#### **Unit Four: Religion in a Pluralist Culture**

“Secularization Falsified” by Peter Berger

Christian struggle in China (video)

Coptic Bishop Response to terrorist bombing (video with subtitles)

King Hussein of Jordan speech (video)

News stories

**\*\*Final Note: the professor reserves the right to make adjustments to the syllabus and class reading/assignment schedule should the need arise. The class will be notified in class and by email at least one full class session prior to any change taking effect.**