



UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK IN PRAGUE

Course: PHL222 History of Religions (3 US credits/6 ECTS)
Semester: Spring 2024
Prerequisites: None
Instructor:
Contact:

1. Catalogue Description

The course is an academic study of religion and world religious traditions. It explores the philosophical, historical, sociological, and doctrinal aspects of the major religious traditions. The course examines the great traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. It also does an overview of the primal, ancient, and classical belief systems, as well as introduces to modern religions, including new religious movements.

2. Course Purpose

The course analyzes the religious traditions in the context of their historical development and their symbiotic relationship with local cultures. It also discusses cross-tradition similarities and uniqueness of each of the religious traditions: the role of doctrinal belief systems, religious social practices, and syncretism in the formations of particular worldviews. Attention also will be given to the relationship of religion and the State (e.g. Constantinianism versus secularism) and attitude of religious traditions toward violence.

After completing this course, the students will acquire the ability to critically evaluate competing religious claims; to understand the sociological and psychological function of religious social practices; to distinguish between the doctrinal, cultural, and political aspects of various religious belief systems. The students will gain knowledge of the history and culture of major religious traditions. This will enable them to better understand the current inter-connected global multicultural environment and to form a constructive and tolerant solution-oriented approach to political and inter-cultural challenges.

3. Required Readings (All available at UNYP Library)

- Fisher, Mary Path and Lee W. Bailey. *An Anthology of Living Religions*. Second Edition, Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2008.
- *The Religions Book*. Jones, Gareth and Georgina Palffy eds., London/ New York/ Munich/ Delhi: DK, 2013.
- Smith, Huston. *The World's Religions*. San Francisco: Harper, 1991 (or newer edition).

Files of the essential reading materials will be available in a scanned form on the course E-learning site.

4. Additional Readings

Will be distributed and assigned, including excerpts from book chapters, op-ed pages, and scholarly journals. The list may be updated regarding the specific interest areas of the students. Among others, the following texts are recommended:

- Bulfinch, Thomas, *Mythology*, New York: Dell Publishing, 1967.
- Campbell, Joseph and Bill Moyers. *The Power of Myth*. New York/ London/ Toronto/ Sydney/ Auckland: Doubleday, 1988.
- Dalai Lama, His Holiness the XIV. *The Hearth of the Buddha's Path*. London: Harper Collins Publishers, 2011.
- Girard, René. *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*. London/Oxford/ New York/ New Delhi/ Sydney: Bloomsbury, 2016.
- James, William. *The Variety of Religious Experience*. New York/London: Collier Books/Collier MacMillan Publishers.
- Jung, Carl and C. Kerényi. *The Science of Mythology*. London/New York: Routledge, 2002.
- Jung, Carl. *Psychology and the Occult*. London/New York: Routledge, 2008.
- Midgley, Mary. *Evolution as Religion*. London/New York: Routledge, 2006.
- Sacks, Jonathan. *Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence*. London: Hodder, 2015.
- Weber, Max. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. London/New York: Routledge, 2007.

5. Learning Outcomes

At the completion of the course the students will be able:

1. To describe and analyze the history and culture of major religious traditions.
2. To describe and critically evaluate competing religious claims.
3. To understand and explain the sociological and psychological function of religious practices.
4. To distinguish between the doctrinal, cultural, and political aspects of religion and be able to identify them in real life situations.
5. To gain skills of understanding other worldviews, religious/cultural traditions and to communicate with them in an informed and solution-oriented manner.

6. Course Schedule

- Week 1: Introduction to the course; the field of religious studies and its development; religion as seen from philosophical, sociological, psychological, theological, historical, and political perspectives. Methodology of interpretation of reality.
- Week 2: Materialist and idealist approaches to the world: what is mind and what is matter? What is the primal source of everything? *Chronos* and *Kairos*. Do we know everything about the Universe and our place in it? What is the meaning of organic life and us living on one of the billions of planets?
- Week 3: Primal prehistorical beliefs. The great existential questions; surviving primal religious traditions today. Ancient and Classical beliefs. Polytheism and the hierarchy of gods; afterlife, rituals, virtue.

- Week 4: Hinduism. The order of the Universe, the cycles of human existence, the female aspect of divine, humans relate to the divine by practice, many paths to the ultimate truth, world is an illusion, non-violence in the political realm.
- Week 5: Buddhism. The origin of Buddhism, the path to truth and escape from the eternal cycle of suffering, kindness and compassion, enlightenment, and the importance of continuous practice.
- Week 6: Judaism. God's covenant and monotheism, the Law, the Messiah, all humans have a divine spark in them, political Zionism, Holocaust, modern approaches in Judaism.
- Week 7: Mid Term Exam. Student presentations.
- Week 8: Review of Mid-Term results. Christianity. Jesus as Alfa and Omega, death on the cross as message to the world, body and soul interpretations, the divine trinity, serving others by transforming the world – not conforming to it; varieties of Christian interpretation; “no salvation outside the Church,” hierarchical and non-hierarchical approaches, the function of prayer.
- Week 9: Islam. Mohammad as God's final messenger, the origin and meaning of Qur'an, The Five Pillars, movements in Islam, Sharia, Jihad; God is beyond comprehension; Islamic revivalism; modern approaches in Islam.
- Week 10: Review of the great living religious traditions. Commonalities and differences: comparison of the core ideas, concepts, and ethical principles. Sacred texts, people, space, time. Contribution to human knowledge and creativity: sociological, philosophical, and cognitive contribution to human development as seen from rational analysis perspective. Problematic areas within each tradition.
- Week 11: Modern Religions. Sikhism, Santeria, following Jesus, Baha'i, Tenrikyo, The Lion of Judah, Scientology, Unification Church, Wicca, Hare Krishna, Falun Dafa, meditative and all-beliefs-accepting movements. Discussing new religious movements.
- Week 12: Facing the Plurality of beliefs. Secularism, agnosticism, atheism, variety of religious traditions and internet; science and religion.
- Week 13: Communicative aspect of religion. Religion, media, politics and violence; stereotypes in the media. Limitations of media information about closed-circle movements. Living in the age of manipulative digital communication technologies. Students choose their final exam topic and start writing the final paper/essay.
- Week 14: Revision of the course. Final exam starts: student presentations. Final papers must be submitted on time before the presentation.

Week 15: Final Exam: student presentations. Final papers must be submitted on time before the presentation.

7. Course Requirements and Grading – the course will be graded on the basis of:

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|--|------|
| Participation/Discussion | 10% |
| Homework, Reaction papers, topic tests | 10% |
| Midterm Exam/paper | 15% |
| Midterm Exam/presentation | 15% |
| Short presentations or papers | 10% |
| Final paper/essay | 20% |
| Final presentation | 20% |
| <hr/> | |
| Total | 100% |

General

All assignments will be graded according to a pre-determined set of criteria appropriate for each assignment. The criteria and rules for each assignment are described in our course site on E-learning; in the heading of appropriate rubric for each assignment.

Participation/Discussion (10%)

Participation means active participation during the class session either in person or online. It also includes active participation in our online discussion forum by timely replies to my posts and engaging in online discussion with classmates. Participation/Discussion grade consists of the median of four grades of four participation periods during the semester.

Homework, Reaction papers, Topic tests (10%)

Homework refers to short written notes in preparation for the class and home reading assignments. Students will be asked to briefly present their work orally and submit their notes in the appropriate rubric of the course site on E-learning. Tasks may be assigned individually or in groups. **Reaction papers** refer to short written reaction notes after watching videos as home assignments. It also means writing peer comments about the presentations of your classmates. Substantial content contributions in our online discussion forum (in the previous item) also will add points to your grade in this category. **Topic tests** will be completed online on E-learning. Each of them will cover one of the major topics of the course. The list of prompting questions will be published ahead of time. The topic exams will be published in the quizzes section on E-learning; they will provide guided learning structure for individual study and ensure that everybody has the knowledge of the whole course material. Each topic test will be open for a number of days for one individual attempt with time limitation for the whole test. Each test will contain seven to fifteen questions and you will be able to go forth and back between the questions within the allocated timeframe. The answers must be written in an essay style i.e. in your own words. 1) Inquiring about religion and worldviews, 2) Ancient and Classical religions, 3) Hinduism, 4) Buddhism, 5) Judaism, 6) Christianity, 7) Islam, 8) Modern religions, 9) Religion and politics.

Midterm Exam/paper (15%)

Midterm is an important milestone that allows students to assess their learning progress. It will consist of two parts: Midterm paper and individual presentation on the

same topic of research up to four minutes maximum. Midterm paper/essay has to be approximately 1,700 words in length and follow the standard academic format: Heading with your name, name and code of the course, semester, name of the university, name of professor, the precise title of the topic. The Midterm essay has to be submitted BEFORE the actual in-class presentation i.e. on a day preceding the live presentation, the latest. The margin of tolerated flexibility regarding the length of the text is 10%. Exceeding the margin of flexibility either way will reduce the total grade of the essay by 5%. Exceeding the length by 20% will result in additional 5% reduction. Further reductions may not go beyond the minimum passing grade, provided that the essay meets the requirements in every other aspect. The heading (title page), footnotes (in case you chose to use them), and the list of sources at the end of your essay are not part of the word count. The absolute minimum of sources used in Midterm research is no less than four sources. It is expected that normally students would use six or more sources.

Midterm Exam/presentation (15%)

Since midterm allows students to assess their learning progress it is important not only to research and write a paper but also to demonstrate mastery of the topic and ability to answer research-related questions. It will consist of an individual presentation up to four minutes maximum, followed by Q/A session. Students will be expected to deliver a well-organized and articulated oral presentation with visuals (PowerPoint or other equivalent presentation tool). After the presentation, students must submit their presentation file on E-learning. Additionally, submitting presentation notes will be a plus.

Short presentations or papers (10%)

Short presentations refer to short, up to three minutes, individual oral presentations with visuals on assigned topics during the entire course. The requirement is for each student to present two short presentations. Exceptions may be allowed for justifiable reasons, such as poor Internet connection for online students or other exceptional circumstances. Upon providing evidence of the justifiable reasons, students may be allowed to submit a presentation with recorded audio or a paper.

Final paper/essay (20%)

Final paper/essay has to be approximately 3,500 words in length and follow the standard academic format: Heading with your name, name and code of the course, semester, name of the university, name of professor, the precise title of the topic. The final essay has to be submitted BEFORE the actual in-class presentation i.e. on a day preceding the live presentation, the latest. The margin of tolerated flexibility regarding the length of the text is 10%. Exceeding the margin of flexibility will reduce the total grade of the essay by 5%. Exceeding the length by 20% will result in additional 5% reduction. Further reductions may not go beyond the minimum passing grade, provided that the essay meets the requirements in every other aspect. There should be eight or more sources used in the final research. The heading (title page), footnotes (in case you chose to use them), and the list of sources at the end of your essay are not part of the word count.

Final presentation (20%)

Final presentation is up to six minutes. The tolerated margin of flexibility is 10%. Exceeding the margin of flexibility will reduce the total grade of the presentation by 5%. Exceeding the length by 20% will result in additional 5% reduction. Further reductions may not go beyond the minimum passing grade, provided that the presentation meets the requirements in every other aspect. The presentation is to be done on the same topic and based on the same research as your essay. It has to be presented in a confident manner and show mastery of the topic. For a final presentation the presenter's knowledge of the topic has to be deeper and broader than represented in the slides. This will enable you to competently and confidently answer questions after the presentation. Written notes or talking points can be used, however verbatim reading of a printed or electronic text is not recommended. The best way is to explain the topic in your own words. Q/A after the presentation is an important component of this assignment.

Grading scale

| Letter Grade | Percent (%) | Generally Accepted Meaning | Notes |
|--------------|-------------|--|---|
| A | 95-100 | Outstanding work | x |
| A- | 90-94 | | x |
| B+ | 87-89 | Good work, distinctly above the average | x |
| B | 83-86 | | x |
| B- | 80-82 | | x |
| C+ | 77-79 | Acceptable Work | x |
| C | 73-76 | | x |
| C- | 70-72 | | x |
| D+ | 67-69 | Work that is significantly below average | Credits for the course will not transfer to ESC |
| D | 63-66 | | |
| D- | 60-62 | | |
| F | 0-59 | Work that does not meet the minimum standards for passing the course | No credits awarded |

8. Key UNYP Policies

Attendance:

It is your responsibility to show up to class on time. If you are late you will be marked as absent for that hour. **If you miss more than 12 (twelve) hours of class for any reason, you will automatically fail the entire course. Pay strict attention to this. This class policy is standard UNYP policy.**

Academic Honesty

- The university's rules on academic dishonesty (e.g., cheating, plagiarism, submitting false information) will be strictly enforced. Please familiarize yourself with the **student honor code** or ask your instructor for clarification.
- For examinations: copying from your neighbor, communicating with another student, using a phone or anything similar will result in you failing the test or quiz.

- On written papers, properly note your sources with academic citations. Cutting and pasting from the Internet without accurately citing the source may be considered plagiarism. Students may be required to submit papers electronically, which could mean an automated check for plagiarism via the Turnitin resource. Students may also be required to defend the content of a paper orally to an instructor as a check on authorship.
- If you have questions about any of the above, please consult with the instructor.

9. General Requirements

- Students are expected to attend each class session and participate in a positive way.
- Students are expected to come to class fully prepared to discuss homework readings, projects or cases.
- Students are expected to turn in homework assignments at the beginning of the class period on the day they are due.
- Students are expected to leave their mobile phones, beepers, pagers, and so forth switched off.
- Students may not use laptops or netbooks for any reason other than taking notes. **Do not** surf the Web during class time. If you do, you will lose the privilege to use a laptop or netbook.
- In the event of illness or emergency, contact your instructor **in advance** to determine whether special arrangements are possible.
- Students are expected to regularly follow instructor's online announcements on E-learning.
- Students are expected to actively participate in the course online discussions and complete the online quizzes and other online assignments in time.
- The previous two items are important elements of interactive learning process and would ensure smooth transition to online version of the course, if necessary.

10. European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS)

- Students who complete the course will receive 6 ECTS credits, which are the equivalent of 3 American credits. (In other words, 2 ECTS credits equal 1 American credit hour.)
- Further, 1 ECTS credit corresponds to 25-30 hours of work. Thus, a 6-credit ECTS course (equivalent to a 3-credit American course) will total 150-180 projected work hours. For this course, students are expected to spend time in the following course-related activities:

| | |
|-------------------------------------|-----------|
| Class lectures and exams | 45 hours |
| Reading class related material | 50 hours |
| Exam preparations | 25 hours |
| Team preparation | 10 hours |
| Short papers, topic exams, homework | 15 hours |
| Final Project preparation | 25 hours |
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| TOTAL | 170 hours |

11. Technology Expectations

Assignments, excluding those that are carried out exclusively in class, must be completed on a computer. Students are assumed to be familiar with the use of the Internet and in particular with the gathering of data from the Worldwide Web. This will be a necessary tool for carrying out some of the course assignments (i.e., long essay or class presentations). Knowledge of Zoom online conference program desirable, but not required. Since most of the course assignments and communication will happen with the help of UNYP E-learning tools, basic user skills are expected.