REL 117 Major Asian Religions

MWF 8:00-8:50  Steiner 106

Prof. Timothy Dobe
Steiner 310
Office Hours: M/W 9-11
e-mail: dobetimo@grinnell.edu
phone: x3228
Course Description

The Asian religions examined in this course (i.e., the Hindu, Buddhist, Confucian, Taoist and Shinto traditions) have shaped and been shaped by cultures that are hundreds—even thousands—of years old. The regions they cover—both then and now—span the vast distances between modern day Afghanistan, Pakistan and India in the ‘West’ and China and Japan in the ‘East.’ This course offers a basic introduction to the beliefs and practices of each tradition and emphasizes the interactions, blendings, co-existence and competition of Asian religions as they occur in these dynamic contexts. Students will encounter the religious claims, experiences and rituals of individual practitioners of Asian religions within complex historical situations of power and change.

Course Goals

In this course students will be enabled and expected to:

• Establish a basic mastery of central terms, mythologies and practices of each tradition.

• Situate religious traditions within history and culture, including the material, political and gendered contexts in which these religions function.

• Trace the development of Buddhism from its beginnings in South Asia through its continuities and transformations in China and Japan and articulate its relationships with other religious traditions.

• Interpret the meaning of religious traditions in the lives of individual practitioners.

• Critically reflect on the meanings, methods and categories of religious studies as an academic discipline.

Office Hours

Monday & Wednesday, 9-11. If you would like to meet with me during office hours, please sign up on the weekly schedule, which will be posted on my office door. If you have a regular scheduling conflict with my office hours, please let me know within the first two weeks of class.
Required Texts

Religions of Asia, John Fenton
Bhagavad Gita, Barbara Miller, tr.
Saints, Storytellers and Scoundrels, Kirin Narayan
The Journey of One Buddhist Nun, Sid Brown
Confucius: The Sacred as Secular, Herbert Fingarette
Seven Taoist Masters, Eva Wong, tr.

All required texts are available for purchase at the Grinnell College bookstore. All other readings will be handed out in class or are accessible by following the “E-reserves” link under “Course Materials” on the course Blackboard. Type in “Dobe Timothy” once on the E-reserves site, and select REL 117.O1. When the list of readings comes up, you will need to look through it to locate the correct reading (i.e., they are not in order and sometimes a reading for one author has two separate entries). On the syllabus these readings are marked with an (E). Bring books, E-reserve texts (printed out) and handouts to class.

Course Requirements and Grading

The following four elements will comprise your final grade for the course. Please let me know within the first full week of classes if, for any reason, you believe that special considerations need to be taken into account in evaluating your performance this semester (e.g., a learning disability). I would be glad to talk with you about this.

1) Attendance and Participation (15%)

An attendance sheet will be passed around at the beginning of each class; it is students’ responsibility to be sure to sign this sheet every class. Since late arrivals and early departures disrupt class, I will count two tardies, two early departures, or any combination of the two as an absence. More than two unexcused absences during the course of the semester will have a significant, adverse effect on your final grade. For an absence to be “excused” requires: an e-mail from you before the class meets alerting me of your coming absence and the reason for it and documentation from a relevant source (Health or Student Services, etc.).

In addition to the basic attendance requirements, students are expected to come to class ready to ask informed questions and to be respectful of and attentive to each other, the professor, and class guests. Coming with the texts assigned for that day on the syllabus (including print-outs of reading from E-reserves) is also a part of basic class preparation.
2) **Small Group and Seminar Participation (15%)**

Since our class size is too large for in-depth discussion, we will break the class up into two smaller groups (Groups A and B) to provide this opportunity. On those weeks that Group A is in seminar as a whole, those in Group B will be in ‘Small Group’ discussion meetings; that is, they will be meeting in their assigned groups of about five students at a regular location of their own choosing (the Grill, etc.) at 8 a.m. When B is in seminar as a whole, those in Group A will be broken down and meeting in their small groups. If these discussions are to be successful, students will need to have carefully read the assigned texts and to bring the texts (including those on E-reserve) to seminar with them.

**Specific requirements:**

**Small Group Leadership**

The leadership of small group discussions will rotate among the members of the group. It is your responsibility to ensure that you lead the group at least once (and that a Group Schedule is handed to the Professor by Week 2). Small group leaders are required to:

- construct an **agenda of questions** for the group before class and to post that agenda to the Discussion Board on Pioneerweb **by 9 p.m. Thursday night.**

- submit a **2-page discussion reflection paper**, along with a **hard copy of their agenda** and an **attendance record**, in class on Monday.

**Seminar Postings**

Students are required to **make a posting to the class Discussion Board by 9 p.m. Thursday night** in preparation for the seminar. Length may vary from week to week but should be roughly between one substantial paragraph and a full page. Furthermore, you are required to respond in your posting to the posting of at least one other student (unless of course you are the first to post).

Your Small Group and Seminar Participation Grade (15%) will be based on your agenda/short reflection papers as small group leaders, the consistency and quality of your bi-monthly seminar posts, and your active contribution to seminar discussions.
3) One Short (2-3 page) Paper (10%)

Students will write a 2-3 page paper, due Monday, Week 15 (10%).

4) Written Exams (60%)

Students will take one in-class exam on 9/27 (15%).

Students will write a take-home exam that will be due on 11/22 in my mailbox in the Steiner Office (20%).

Students will take an in-class final exam, which, while focusing mainly on material covered after the mid-term break, will include material from the entire semester (25%).

Note on Handing in Assignments

All assignments must be turned in in hard copy form either in class or to my mailbox in the Steiner main office. No e-mail copies will be accepted in place of a hard copy.

Academic Honesty

For a helpful discussion of and practical guidelines for following Grinnell’s Academic Honesty policies see: http://web.grinnell.edu/WritingLab/CitationGuides/achondiscuss.html
Class and Reading Schedule

Week One

8/25 Introduction

Week Two

*Doing Religion, Doing Hinduism*

8/28 What is Religion?
Read Fenton, “Introduction”
Read Nye, Chapter 5 “Belief” and Chapter 6 “Ritual” (E, chapters listed separately)

8/30 Is Hinduism a Religion?
Read Fenton, Chapter 1 and Chapter 2
*Purusha Sukta* (Rig Veda X.90) (class handout on Monday)
Film: “Altar of Fire”

9/1 The Sound of Religion
Group A seminar, Group B in small groups
Read Graham, “Scripture as Spoken Word” (E)

Week Three

*The Ins and Outs and Hinduism*

9/4 From Veda to Vedanta
Read Fenton, Chapter 3
Read Olivelle, tr. Chapter 6, Chandogya Upanisad (E)

9/6 Loving the Gods
Read Fenton, Chapter 4, (stop at “The Shaktas”)
Film: “Puja”

9/8 Seeing the Gods and Being Seen By Them
Group B in Seminar, Group A in Small Groups
Read Diana Eck, *Darśan* (E, two selections listed separately)

Recommended Website
Here Hindus can take Darśan and Worship the Goddess on-line.
**Week Four**  
*Krishna: The Naughty, Philosopher-God*

- **9/11** The Gods’ Descents in a Hindu World  
  Read Fenton, Chapter 4, pp. 68-80 (from “The Shaktas”)

  **Recommended Website**  
  Spidey restores Dharma.

- **9/13** The Gopis and the Circle Dance  
  Read Dimmitt, “Krishna” (E)  
  Read *Bhagavad Gita*, Introduction-The Third Teaching

  **Required Website**  
  Listen to the story (9 minutes) and/or watch the slideshow (about 8 minutes)

- **9/15** Krishna Grows Up  
  Finish *Bhagavad Gita*  
  Groups A and B in Small Groups

  **Recommended Weblink**  
  To hear a few key verses of the Gita recited in Sanskrit go to:  
  (note: you may need to download Shockwave in order to listen and view.)

**Week Five**  
*Gurus and Monks*

- **9/18** Renouncing the World  
  Re-read Fenton, pp. 60-65 (starting at “Vedanta”)

- **9/20** Film: “The Fourth Stage”  
  Read Narayan, *Storytellers, Saints and Scoundrels*, Introduction and Chapter 3

- **9/22** Meeting Swamiji  
  Group A in seminar, Group B in small groups  
  Read Narayan, *Storytellers, Saints and Scoundrels*, Chapters 1, 2 and 4

**Week Six**  
*A World of Stories*

- **9/25** So, what is Hinduism?

- **9/27** Exam #1

- **9/29** Read Narayan, *Storytellers, Saints and Scoundrels*, Part II (pp. 113-228)  
  Group B seminar, Group A in small groups
Week Seven
Buddha In and Against the Vedic World

10/2 The Buddha’s Story and his World
Read Fenton, Chapter 7
Read Strong, “The Great Departure and Enlightenment” (E)

10/4 The Buddha’s Teaching and Legacy
Read Jonathan S. Walter’s, “Gotami’s Story” (handout)
Read Brown, The Journey of One Buddhist Nun, Chapter 1

10/6 Meeting Maechi Wabi
Read Brown, The Journey of One Buddhist Nun, Chapters 2-6
Group A seminar, Group B small groups

Week Eight
Varieties of Buddhism

10/9 Buddhism in Threes
Read Strong, pp. 23-33 (E)

Recommended website:
Multimedia Tour: Explore Buddha’s Wheel of Life with Tibetan expert Robert Thurman

10/11 Mahayana Buddhism
Read Fenton, Chapter 8
Read Strong, “The Bodhisattva Path” (handout in class on Monday)
Read Beastie Boys lyrics, “Bodhisattva Vow” (handout in class on Monday)
Read Brown, The Journey of One Buddhist Nun, Chapters 7-9

10/13
Read Brown, The Journey of One Buddhist Nun, Chapter 10-Conclusion.
Group B seminar, Group A in small groups

October Break
Week Nine
The Chinese World

10/23 Confucius and His World
Read Fenton, Chapter 10 up to p. 172 (stop at “Lao zi”)
Read Analects, selections (handout)

Film: “The Confucian Tradition”

10/25 Li
Read Neshar, “Shrines to Local Former Worthies” (E)

10/27 Is life a Ritual?
Read Fingarette, Confucius: The Sacred as Secular
Group A seminar, Group B in small groups

Week Ten
The Dao of the Dao

10/30 Philosophical Daoism
Read Fenton, pp. 172 -175 (start with “Lao-zi”)
Read Dao De Jing and Xuang zi selections (handout)

11/1 Religious Daoism
Read Fenton, Chapter 11, through p. 180 (stop at “The Buddhist Contribution“)
Film: “Taoism—A Question of Balance”
Read Wong, tr. Seven Taoist Masters, pp. xv-72.

11/3
Read Wong, tr., Seven Taoist Masters, pp. 73-176.
Group B seminar, Group A in small groups

Week Eleven
The Chinese (Laughing) Buddha

11/6 Reimagining Buddhism in China
Re-read Fenton, pp. 114-118 and Read Chapter 9
Read “In Defense of Buddhism: The Disposition of Error” at
http://acc6.its.brooklyn.cuny.edu/~phalsall/texts/dispos.html
11/8 Engaging Samsara
Read Fenton, p. 180 “The Buddhist Contribution” to end of Chapter 11
Read Strong, “Women and the Sangha: Two Cases from China” (E)

11/10 Buddhist Defense, Buddhist Offense
Read Laughing at the Tao (handout)
Group A seminar, Group B in small groups

Week Twelve
Japan

11/13 Zen (or Killing the Buddha)
Read D. T. Suzuki, “What is Zen” and “Satori: Or Acquiring a New Viewpoint” (E)

11/15 Shinto
Read Fenton, Chapter 13
Take-home Exam Handed out

Film: Japan’s Yasukuni Shrine

11/17
Read Reader and Tanabe, “The Providers of Benefits: Gods, Saints, and Wizards” (E)
Group B seminar, Group A in small groups (final meetings)

Week Thirteen (Thanksgiving Week)

11/20 Work on Take Home Exam

11/22 Take Home Exam Due by 12 noon, Steiner Hall

11/23-4 Thanksgiving Break
Week Fourteen  
Major Asian Religions Now

11/27  The World’s Parliament of Religions  
Read Fenton, Chapter 5

11/29  A Mini-Parliament of Religions  
Read Carrette and King, Chapter 3, Selling Spirituality (E)

12/1  Zen and Pure Land  
Note: No small groups or seminars  
Read Sallie B. King, “Awakening Stories of Zen Buddhist Women” (E)  
Read Stevenson, “Death Bed Testimonials of the Pure Land Faithful” (E)

Week Fifteen  
Major Asian Religions Now

12/4  
Read Fenton on Buddhism and the West pp. 152-157 and on Japan pp. 212-216  
Read Gravois, “Meditate on It” (E)  
Read Strong, pp. 343-349 (E)

Short Paper Due

12/6  
Film: “Doing Time, Doing Vipasanna”

Night Meeting: Exam Review, 7 p.m. (location TBA)

12/8  
Final Class