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
Friday 2:15-4:45. 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, and email me a confirmation of your meeting time. 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 on E-reserves accessible through course Blackboard. 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 at Rosenfield, etc.) at classtime (1:15 p.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 and small group with them. How helpful or aimless the small group meetings feel depends mostly upon the students in the group; group meetings will only be as interesting and helpful as your preparation of and engagement with the material allow them to be.

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 (about 5 or 6, not more) 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.
- a basic requirement of questions and reflection paper is to include several direct references to/quotations (with page citations) in your work

Seminar Postings

Students are required to make a posting to the class Discussion Board by 9 a.m. Friday morning 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, your post
should include at least two direct references/quotations (with page citations) to the reading and a response to the posting of at least one other student (unless of course you are the first to post). You are also encouraged to respond to the thoughts of your classmates in your 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 toward the end of the semester (10%).

4) Written Exams (60%)
Students will write a first take-home exam assessing the first five weeks of class material (15%).
Students will write mid-term take-home exam (20%).
Students will take a take-home 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

Course Schedule
Week One

1/21 Introduction

1/23 What is Religion?
   Read Fenton, “Introduction”
   Read Nye, Chapter 5 “Belief” (E)

1/25 Is Hinduism a Religion?
Read Fenton, Chapter 1
Read Nye, Chapter 6 “Ritual” (E)
Purusha Sukta (Rig Veda X.90) (class handout)

Week Two
Doing Hinduism, The Way of Action

1/28 Karma
Read Fenton, Chapter 2

1/30 Film “Altar of Fire”

2/1 The Sound of Religion

Group A in Seminar, Group B in Small Groups
Read Graham, Chapter 5, “Holy Write and Holy Word” and Chapter 6, “Scripture as Spoken Word: “The Indian Paradigm” (E)

Week Three **** (Heavy Reading Week)
The Way of Knowledge

2/4 From Veda to Vedanta (The Way of Knowledge)

Read Fenton, Chapter 3
Read Olivelle, tr. Chapter 6, Chandogya Upanisad (E)

2/6 Renouncing the World
Read Narayan, Storytellers, Saints and Scoundrels, Introduction, Chapter 3, 5 and 6

2/8 Group B in Seminar, Group A in Small Groups
Read Narayan, Introduction and Chapters 1, 2, 7, 9 and pp. 242-249

Week Four
The Way of Love

2/11 The Gods’ Descents in a Hindu World
Read Fenton, Chapter 4

Recommended Website
http://www.gothamcomics.com/spiderman_india/
Spidey restores Dharma.

2/13 The Gopis and the Circle Dance
Read Dimmitt, “Krishna” (E)  
Eck, Darśan (E, two selections listed separately)  

Required Website  
Listen to the story [Click “Listen Now”]  
and watch the slideshow [Click “View a Multimedia Slideshow”]  
(about 20 minutes total)  

2/15 Film: Puja  

Week Five [no classes]  

Read, The Bhagavad Gita, Introduction, Teachings 1-10  
Complete Gita Reading Guide  

Week Six  

2/25 The Gita and Hinduism  
Read, Gita, Teachings 11-18, and Afterword  

Gita Reading Questions Due  
Exam 1 Handed Out  

2/27 Group A in Seminar, Group B in Small Groups  

2/29 So, what is Hinduism?  

Week Seven  
Buddha In and Against the Vedic World  

3/3 The Buddha’s Story and his World  

Read Fenton, Chapter 7  
Read Strong, “The Great Departure and Enlightenment” (handout)  
Exam 1 Due  

3/5 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
3/7  Meeting Maechi Wabi

Read Brown, The Journey of One Buddhist Nun, Chapters 2-6
Group B seminar, Group A small groups

Week Eight
Varieties of Buddhism

3/10  Buddhism in Threes

Read Strong, pp. 23-33 (handout)

Recommended website:
Multimedia Tour: Explore Buddha’s Wheel of Life with expert Dr. Thurman

3/12  Mahayana Buddhism

Read Fenton, Chapter 8
Read Strong, “The Bodhisattva Path” (handout)
Read Beastie Boys lyrics, “Bodhisattva Vow” (handout)
Read Brown, The Journey of One Buddhist Nun, Chapters 7-9

3/14  Group A seminar, Group B in small groups
Read Brown, The Journey of One Buddhist Nun, Chapter 10-Conclusion.

Spring Break

Week Nine
The Chinese World

3/31  Confucius and His World

Read Fenton, Chapter 10 up to p. 172 (stop at “Lao zi”)
Film: “The Confucian Tradition”

4/2  Li
Read Analects, selections (handout)
Read Fingarette, Confucius: The Sacred as Secular
Introduction and Chapter 1

4/4  Is life a Ritual?
Read Fingarette, Confucius: The Sacred as Secular (finish remaining chapters)
Group B seminar, Group A in small groups

Week Ten *** Heavy Reading Week
The Dao of the Dao

4/7  Philosophical Daoism
Read Fenton, pp. 172 -175 (start with “Lao-zi”)  
Read Dao De Jing and Xuan zi selections (handout)
Take-home Exam 2 Handed out

4/9  Religious Daoism
Read Fenton, Chapter 11, through p. 180 (stop at “The Buddhist Contribution“)
Read Wong, tr. Seven Taoist Masters, pp. xv-72.

4/11  Group A seminar, Group B in small groups
Read Wong, tr., Seven Taoist Masters, pp. 73-176.

Week Eleven
The Chinese (Laughing) Buddha

4/14  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
Take-home Exam 2 Due

4/16  Engaging Samsara
Read Fenton, p. 180 “The Buddhist Contribution” to end of Chapter 11
Read Strong, “Women and the Sangha: Two Cases from China” (handout)
4/18  Buddhist Defense, Buddhist Offense
       Read Laughing at the Tao (handout)
       Group B seminar, Group A in small groups

Week Twelve
Japan
4/21  Japan and Shinto
       Read Fenton, Chapter 13
       Film: Japan’s Yasukuni Shrine

4/23  Zen (or Killing the Buddha)
       Read D. T. Suzuki, “What is Zen” and “Satori: Or Acquiring a New
       Viewpoint” (E)

4/25  Group A seminar, Group B in small groups (final meetings)
       Read Reader and Tanabe, “The Providers of Benefits: Gods, Saints, and Wizards”
       (E)

Week Thirteen
Major Asian Religions Now
4/28  The World’s Parliament of Religions
       Read Fenton, Chapter 5

4/30  A Mini-Parliament of Religions
       Read Carrette and King, Chapter 3, Selling Spirituality (E)

5/2  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 Fourteen
5/5  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

5/7 Film: “Doing Time, Doing Vipasanna”

5/9 Final Class

Take Home Final Handed out