THE RELIGIONS OF ASIA

Dr. Suzanne Bessenger, Randolph College (Lynchburg, VA)

sbessenger@randolphcollege.edu

Used with Permission

In 2016, Dr. Suzanne Bessenger participated in a Teaching Interfaith Understanding faculty development seminar, run in partnership between the Council of Independent Colleges and Interfaith Youth Core, and generously funded by the Henry Luce Foundation. For information on future seminars, and to access more resources created by seminar alumni, visit https://www.ifyc.org/content/ifyc-cic-resources.

Course Objectives

This course provides a thematic and historical overview of four major Asian religious traditions—Hinduism, Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism—in the cultural regions of India and China. To accomplish this ambitious goal, we will direct our focus to the major themes of each tradition, paying attention to how some of these traditions developed in dialogue with each other, and how others crystallized into distinct traditions in reaction to each other. Examining each religion’s development over time, we will examine the thematic continuities that were maintained, allowing us to identify each as a distinct religious tradition. Additionally, we will examine the interplay of each of these traditions with folk practices that both borrow elements from the major traditions and develop elements entirely distinct from them. This semester-long inquiry will be guided by the following question: What is the most ethically responsible way to encounter religious difference?

Specific themes that we will address include the following:

- What is religion as opposed to personal, moral, or political philosophy in India and China?
- How is religious identity defined in cultures that embrace a plurality of traditions?
- What common religious problems do the four traditions attempt to answer?
- How do we define religious pluralism? What are some approaches to religious difference?

---

1 In consultation with the author, this syllabus has been edited for length, removing details particular to the author’s context such as office hours and location, absence policies, honor codes, and other instructor-specific (or institution-specific) details.
Required Readings

- Strong, *The Experience of Buddhism*, Cengage Learning. Page numbers below reference 3rd edition, but most editions have the same readings; I listed the section titles as well, so find whatever book that’s least expensive.
- Extensive articles on electronic reserve and on Moodle (our course website).

Course Assignments

**Attendance & Informed Class Participation: 20%**

Successful participation entails attending every class prepared for informed and thoughtful discussion of the readings due that day. You will be graded on the quality of your contributions to class discussions, your sensitivity and receptivity to others’ comments, and your level of engagement with course materials and the questions they raise. Bring each article or book to class on the day we are due to discuss it.

**Hinduism Exam: 25%**

The exam will consist of multiple choice, fill-in-the-blank, short answer, quote identification, and short essay questions. Essay question: What do you think is the best way for you to approach religious difference, and why?

**Buddhism Exam: 25%**

The exam will consist of multiple choice, fill-in-the-blank, short answer, quote identification, and short essay questions. With one exception, this exam is not comprehensive, but only covers material since the previous exam. The exception is this essay question: What do you think is the best way for you to approach religious difference, and why?

**Chinese Religions Exam (Final): 30%**

The final exam will consist of multiple choice, fill-in-the-blank, short answer, quote identification, and short essay questions. With one exception, this exam is NOT comprehensive, although it will include questions about Buddhism as it is practiced in China. The exception is this essay question: What do you think is the best way for you to approach religious difference, and why?
COURSE SCHEDULE

**Week 1: Introduction**

**Monday:**
- Topic: What Are You Getting Yourself Into?
- Introductions
- Read course syllabus
- Mark all due dates in your personal calendar
- Contemplate course requirements

**Wednesday:**
- Topic: A Scalpel in Your Eye: How Do We Deal With Others' Religious Beliefs?

**Friday:**
- Topic: Last Hippie Standing
- Watch before class: (Web) Marcus Robbin, “Last Hippie Standing” (2001, 44 minutes). View the film before coming to class. The film is available streaming at the website CultureUnplugged. **Content Warning:** This film contains images of naked hippies.

**Week 2: Paths of Hinduism - Karma (Action)**

**Monday:**
- Topic: Overview of Hinduism: Karma, Jnana, and Bhakti

**Wednesday:**
- Topic: Karma Yoga: Liberation through Ritual?
- Doniger (trans), *The Rig Veda*: 29-32 (Purusa myth) - Moodle

**Friday:**
- Topic: In-Class Film & Discussion
- Video clip: “Agnicayana: Altar of Fire”

**Week 3: Paths of Hinduism - Jnana (Knowledge)**

**Monday:**
- Topic: Permeable Persons: Dharma, Varna, and Jati
- Olivelle, *The Law Code of Manu* pp 3-12 (editor’s outline); 13-22 (Chapter One) – Moodle
- “Touchable,” *The Economist* - Moodle
Wednesday:
- Topic: “That Thou Art”?: Knowledge and Renunciation in the Upanishads
- Olivelle, *Upanishads*, 148-156 - Moodle

Friday:
- Topic: In-Class Film & Discussion
- Video Clip: “Four Holy Men”

**Week 4: Paths of Hinduism - Bhakti (Devotion)**

Monday:
- Topic: Rise of the Gods and Goddesses: Visnu, Siva, & the Goddess
- *World Religions: Eastern Traditions*, Oxtoby (ed), 47-51, 73-83 (through Deepavali section) – Moodle
- DUE: Do some internet searching for images of Krishna (also spelled Krsna), Vishnu (also spelled Visnu), Shiva (also spelled Siva), and Durga. Email your images to me.

Wednesday:
- Topic: Liberation Through Devotion: Bhakti as a Religious Path?
- Falk, “Puja” – Moodle

Friday:
- Topic: What is Pluralism?
- Diana Eck, “Is Our God Listening?” – Moodle

**Week 5: Pluralism and Hinduism Exam**

Monday:
- Topic: Case study discussion
- Read case study - online article here

Wednesday:
- Topic: Hinduism Review; come prepared with your questions
- Hinduism Review Sheet – Moodle

Friday:
- Hinduism Exam
Week 6: Buddhism's Beginnings

Monday:
- Topic: Life of the Buddha
- Strong, *Experience of Buddhism*, pages 7-24; 45-48

Wednesday:
- Topic: Teachings of the Buddha, Part One: The Four Noble Truths
- Strong 42-45 “Realizing the Four Noble Truths”; 108-110 “The Arising of Suffering”, “Interdependent Origination”

Friday:
- Topic: Class discussion
- Reread for discussion: Strong 42-45 “Realizing the Four Noble Truths”; 108-110 “The Arising of Suffering”, “Interdependent Origination”

Week 7: Buddhist Worlds

Monday:
- Topic: Teachings of the Buddha, Part Two: Anatman & Nirvana

Wednesday:
- Topic: Worlds of the Buddha: The Six Realms
- End of class: Email instructor 3 discussion questions about Buddhism
- Strong, *Experience of Buddhism*, 36-42

Friday:
- Topic: Class discussion on week’s readings
- Bring all week’s readings for discussion

Week 8: Buddhist Lives

Monday:
- Fall Break, no class
- Begin reading assignments below, if desired

Wednesday:
- Topic: Fields of Merit - Monasticism, Laypersons, and the Workings of Karma
- Strong, *Experience of Buddhism*, pages 63-67, 75-77
Friday:
- Topic: Class Discussion, film and Eck
- Reread Diana Eck, “Is Our God Listening?” – Moodle

**Week 9: Buddhism Exam**

Monday:
- Topic: Case Study
- BBC News: “Anti-Muslim Monk” – Moodle

Wednesday:
- Topic: Buddhism Review; bring your questions
- Buddhism exam review sheet – Moodle

Friday:
- Buddhism Exam

**Week 10: Religion in China – Confucianism**

Monday:
- Adler, “Chinese Religious Traditions” - Moodle

Wednesday:
- Topic: Confucius and Confucianism
- Ivanhoe and Van Norden, “Kongzi (Confucius) ‘The Analects’”, in Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy, 1-54 (NOTE: This looks long, but is not. Pay attention to each virtue that Kongzi addresses, and how he responds.)

Friday:
- Continue with Kongzi (above)

**Week 11: Religion in China, continued: Confucianism and Daoism**

Monday:
- Topic: Confucians on Human Nature – Mencius
- Ivanhoe and Van Norden, in Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy “Mengzi (Mencius)” section: Introduction, Books One, Two, Six, Seven

Wednesday:
- Topic: Confucians on Human Nature – Xunzi
- “Xunzi” section: Introduction, Chapters One, Two, Nineteen, Twenty-Two, Twenty-Three
Friday:

- Topic: Laozi and His Way
- Worksheets on Moodle

**Week 12: Buddhism in China**

Monday:

- Topic: Zhuangzi & Contemplative Daoism

Wednesday:

- Topic: Zhuangzi & Contemplative Daoism

Friday:

- Topic: Mahayana Innovations

**Week 13: No Class**

Monday:

- No class: Bessenger at conference
- Film: “Amongst White Clouds”: ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FumyvVOVbaY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FumyvVOVbaY))

Wednesday: No Class, Thanksgiving Break

Friday: No Class, Thanksgiving Break

**Week 14: Mahayana concluded**

Monday:

- Topic: Mahayana Innovations, continued

Wednesday:

- Topic: Pure Land Buddhism
- Pure Land Sutra – Moodle

Friday

- No class, catch up day
**Week 15: Religion and Pluralism**

Monday:
- Topic: What difference does a difference make?
- Diana Eck, “The Imagined Community: Spiritual Interdependence and a Wider Sens of ‘We’”, from *Encountering God*, 200-202, 218-231 - Moodle

Wednesday:
- Topic: How do you encounter religious difference?
- “My So-Called Opinions” - Moodle

Friday:
- Topic: Exam Review
- Bring in your own case study to class

**Week 16: Final Exam – Details TBD**