Religion 150: Religions of South Asia

Winter 2009
Leighton 330
MW 11:10–12:20, F 12:00–1:00

Course Description

A survey of the origins and classical development of the major religious traditions of the Indian subcontinent. Primary attention will be given to the Hindu and Buddhist communities, but Islam and the Jain and Sikh traditions are also considered. Readings are drawn mainly from Indian sources in English translation.

The purpose of this course is to introduce key themes, continuities, and debates among the diversity of religious traditions that have found fertile soil in South Asia. This is an enormous proposition, as our first class sessions should make clear, and our coverage will necessarily be impressionistic. I have organized the course around what I position as two pivotal historical “conversations.” One, to be dated to the centuries bracketing the dawn of the Common Era, will represent debates joined by orthodox Brahmans—whose doctrines became central to what we now know as Hinduism—with the advocates of teachings that became crystallized as rival religious traditions: Buddhism and Jainism. The second great conversation waxes over a thousand years later, when a very different generation of Hindu thinkers debates a different set of questions with Muslims and Sikhs.

I will provide lecture-style exposition as appropriate, especially in the first weeks, but I expect that most class sessions will come to follow a loose discussion format. Class discussion will be initiated with the unpacking of key concepts thematically connected with the reading. Over the course of the term, each student will take responsibility for one such concept, examining its relevance to the assigned text and ending with one or two questions for the rest of the class. In support of this minor oral presentation, an expository paragraph or two should be posted the day before class on Moodle; I will follow up with posted comments. Along with this requirement, which is ungraded, and the formal assignments—an in-class midterm exam and two papers—there are two other minor, ungraded assignments: a map exercise and an informal essay. I look forward to touching base with each of you individually on at least two occasions in the coming term—to talk over the discussion-leader assignment and brainstorm on the topic of your research paper.

Required Texts

Fred W. Clothey, Religion in India: A Historical Introduction

Donald S. Lopez, ed., Religions of India in Practice (in the reading schedule, this title is abbreviated as “RIP”)

Deepak Sarma, ed., Hinduism: A Reader
Christopher Shackle and Arvind-pal Singh Mandair, eds., *Teachings of the Sikh Gurus: Selections from the Sikh Scriptures*

John S. Strong, *The Experience of Buddhism: Sources and Interpretations*

**Course Requirements**

1. Class participation, including discussion-leader assignments: 20%
2. Film essay, 4–5 pp.: 15%
3. Midterm exam: 25%
4. Final research paper, 10 pp.: 40%

**Boilerplate**

1. Eating in class bugs me, so please don’t bring in anything solid to chow down on while class is in session. If you feel you have to, for blood sugar–related reasons or anything else, tell me about it before we begin.
2. I reserve the right to make fun of you if your cell phone goes off.
3. Please turn in all written assignments to me (or my office mailbox) on paper. It’s up to you to print it out in time, not up to me. And when I grade papers, I mark them up with comments, so make sure you pick them up!
4. Late assignment policy: In principle, pretty mellow. As far as I’m concerned, there’s one cardinal rule: *If you need more time than what I’ve indicated, get in touch and clear it with me.* I promise to be accessible—by e-mail, by office phone, and in person before and after class and at the office. Don’t be a stranger: if you need help with the assignments—whether your concerns are time-related, text-related, or anything else—consider me your first stop.
5. Reading assignments on this syllabus are subject to change. There’s no dearth of scholarly material on the theme of our class; the trick will be to see how our discussions develop and what sources seem to be most promising. I’ll be sure to announce any revisions or augmentations well ahead of time in class and through e-mail.

**Course Schedule**

**week 1—Introductions**

Jan. 5 (M)

*introductions of: members of the class; the general scheme of the class; its goals, materials, requirements, and standards*

7 (W)


*discuss discussion-leader assignment*

*assign map exercise*
9 (F)
reading: RIP, “A Brief History of Religions in India,” pp. 4–52
determine discussion-leader assignments
assign writing exercise, “Facts about Hinduism”
map exercise due in class

week 2—Sacrifice

12 (M)

14 (W)

16 (F)

week 3—Renunciation

19 (M)

21 (W)
writing exercise due in class

23 (F)

week 4—Dharma I: A Middle Way?

26 (M)

28 (W)
30 (F)  

**week 5—Dharma II: Everything in Its Place**

Feb. 2 (M)  

4 (W)  

6 (F)  
*in-class screening:* *Altar of Fire* (dir. Robert Gardner, 1976)

**week 6—And Now for Something Completely Different**

11 (W)  
*in-class midterm exam*

12 (Th)  
*screening (7:00 in Leighton 304):* *Amar Akbar Anthony* (dir. Manmohan Desai, 1977)

13 (F)  
*film discussion*

**week 7—Devotion**

16 (M)  

18 (W)  
*readings:* “Developments in the Late Medieval Period,” in Clothey, *Religion in India*, pp. 137–161;  
*The Bhagavata Purana,* in Sarma, *Hinduism*, pp. 201–221

20 (F)  
week 8—Submission

23 (M)
discuss final paper

25 (W)
film essay due

27 (F)
in-class screening: I Am a Sufi, I Am a Muslim (dir. Dirk Dumon, 1994)

week 9—Gurus and Disciples I

Mar. 2 (M)

4 (W)

6 (F)
reading: Shacke and Mandair, Teachings of the Sikh Gurus, selections

week 10—Gurus and Disciples II

9 (M)
reading: Shacke and Mandair, Teachings of the Sikh Gurus, selections

11 (W)

16 (M)
Final Paper Due: 9:30 PM IN MY MAILBOX, RELIGION DEPARTMENT