

## Comparative Religion (REL 205)

Dr. Conroy

[fconroy@bcc.edu](mailto:fconroy@bcc.edu)

<http://staff.bcc.edu/philosophy>

609.894.9311 (ext 1620)

### **Catalogue description**

The world's major religions, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, are examined and compared. Emphasis is on reading and interpreting sacred texts, as well as exploring the implications of each religion for how life is lived.

**Texts** (\*denotes books that should be purchased, from BCC bookstore, etc.)

- *Tao Te Ching*, by Lao Tzu, translated by Stephen Mitchell,\* and *Ta Hsueh*, by Confucius, translated by James Legge and Ezra Pound
- *The Gospel according to Luke*, Christian Bible
- *What the Buddha Taught*, by Walpola Rahula\*
- *Approaching the Qur'an: The Early Revelations*, translated by Michael Sells\*
- *The Particulars of Rapture: Reflections on Exodus* by Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg,\* and *The Book of Exodus*, Jewish Bible (Torah)
- *The Bhagavad-Gita*,\* translated by Barbara Stoler Miller\*

### **Additional sources you will need**

- Resources on Ashok Gangadean's concepts of "deep dialogue" and "double brackets" <http://astro.temple.edu/~dialogue/htm#SE>, [www.haverford.edu/phil/faculty/gangadeanteach.htm](http://www.haverford.edu/phil/faculty/gangadeanteach.htm), [www.awakeningmind.org](http://www.awakeningmind.org)
- Forum on Religion and Ecology [www.environment.harvard.edu/religion](http://www.environment.harvard.edu/religion)
- Confucian text: "Ta Hsueh" <http://staff.bcc.edu/philosophy/TaHsueh/Tahsueh.htm> and <http://staff.bcc.edu/philosophy/TaHsueh/TAHSUEHlvp.htm>

### **Requirements and weight**

#### **I. Journal (50% of grade, in 2 parts)**

The first step is to take extensive notes on everything you learn in class and in your reading. The second step is to rewrite these notes each week into coherent journal entries. Bring these to class every time, always ready to read aloud to help us review. Your journal is due February 29 for first half-semester grading (25%), and April 28 for second half-semester grading (25%).

## II. Final in-class Writing (25%)

You will be asked to demonstrate your accomplishment of course objectives by writing an in-class essay during exam week on a question not known in advance. In this essay you will be expected to:

- Show similarities between a Western and a non-Western religion that at first might seem to be very different from each other.
- Apply critical thinking appropriate to comparative religion, especially the method of Deep Dialogue.
- Demonstrate a scholarly and open-minded attitude.
- Accurately portray elements of each religion.

The essay is closed book, and is normally to be written in one hour.

## III. Class participation (25%)

The class will be conducted as a sophomore **seminar**. This means the professor shares the work of teaching the class with the students, under his leadership. Therefore you are not only expected to attend **every** class meeting, but also to contribute actively in a manner that shows real preparation. If the class seems to be coming unprepared, the professor will resort to quizzes to separate the sheep from the goats!

Three class hours may be missed without penalty, but all work must be made up. Further absences may have an effect on your grade, unless there is medical documentation and careful consultation with the professor. Missing class because of “work” is **not** an excuse: you need to make a choice of committing to the class. Arriving late or leaving early disrupts the class, and may be counted as absences.

Pay attention to the ninth week withdrawal (**W**) date: if you do choose to drop the class, you must withdraw **officially** at the registration office by that date. Otherwise the professor is required to fail you, which he doesn’t want to do!

### Course objectives

Students completing this course should be able to:

1. Recognize differences between how religion is studied in a scholarly way from a religious way.
2. Demonstrate sensitivity to how sacred scriptures are read by scholars.
  - Demonstrate sensitivity to scholarly readings of the *Tao Te Ching*.
  - Demonstrate sensitivity to scholarly readings of a Confucian classic.
  - Demonstrate sensitivity to scholarly Christian readings of the Christian Bible.

- Demonstrate sensitivity to a Buddhist scholarly reading of early sutras.
  - Demonstrate sensitivity to Muslim scholarly readings of the *Qur'an*.
  - Demonstrate sensitivity to Jewish scholarly readings of *Torah*.
  - Demonstrate sensitivity to a scholarly reading of the *Gita*.
3. Demonstrate awareness of the new context for the scholarly study of comparative religion since 1990, incorporating the primal religions and ecology.
5. Demonstrate critical thinking in approaching the study of religion.
- Explain ways of thinking, not merely 'beliefs.'
  - Explain more than one side of a question.
  - Reflect on one's own initial premises.
  - Employ Deep Dialogue.
  - Use arguments that question, yet try to understand religious 'truths.'
6. Write analytically and critically about religion, meeting ETS standards as adapted for a 200-level philosophy and religion course (see writing rubric).
7. Compare religions in a way that reflects 21<sup>st</sup> century understandings of what religions share. E.g.,
- The mysterious (or numinous) quality of the universe, evoking reverence and respect.
  - The precious quality of life.
  - That insight that this world is more "a communion of subjects than a collection of objects" (Thomas Berry).
  - The limits imposed by death and suffering.
  - The search for a creative equilibrium: a joyful/sober wisdom; our creative/destructive side.
  - The value of being more, not having more.
  - An "integral lens" rather than an "ego lens."
8. Define religion in a way appropriate for a diverse society in a global world.
9. Discuss the causes of religious extremism.
10. Compare/contrast the metaphysical claims and ethical teachings of the religions.

### **Schedule of classes by unit**

- Jan. 18 and 25: Preliminary week (setting the tone)
- a. The importance of Deep Dialogue and the Earth Charter
  - b. Yoga, meditation and prayer
  - c. The question of an overall textbook; the Huston Smith film series
  - d. Not a course on "what they believe"
  - e. Not a course that is critical of religion, but that looks at religion in a different way

Jan. 28, Feb. 1, 4, and 8: the Tao (Taoism and Confucianism)

Feb. 11, 15, 18 and 22: Christianity

February 25, 29, Mar. 10 and 14: Buddhism

Mar. 17 and 24: Interlude week on extra topics (e.g., religious conflict and extremism, indigenous religions, religion and animals)

Mar. 28, 31, Apr. 4, and 7: Islam

Apr. 11, 14, 18 and 21: Judaism

Apr. 25, 28, May 2, 5: Hinduism

Exam week