

171-0-20

Varieties of Religious Tradition: African Traditional Religions

Muhammad Umar, MW 12-1:20pm, Elder Hall 030

Introduction to African Traditional Religions explores the diversity of the indigenous religious beliefs and practices in Africa south of the Sahara through case studies of selected African communities. The course begins with a general overview of different approaches to the academic study of African traditional religions, including critical examination of the controversies and criticisms surrounding the different approaches to the subject. The historical backgrounds and contemporary contexts of the diverse religious beliefs and practices, as well as the religious institutions and leaders will be examined. Case studies will focus on selected examples from different communities and ethnic groups across the continent with the objective of gaining deeper insights into the critical dimensions of African religions such as the human interactions with deities, spirits and ancestors, as well as myths, rituals and symbols of African religions. The interface between African indigenous religions with Islam and Christianity will be explored particularly in relation to the formation of individual and communal identities. Other topics will include gender issues, moral systems, and the contemporary challenges facing the indigenous religions of Africa.

210-0-20

Introduction to Buddhism

Antonio Ferrone, JTh 11-12:20pm, Harris 107

This course provides an introduction to key aspects of the Buddhist religious traditions of multiple South and East Asian countries. Through careful examination of a variety of literature produced by these traditions, we will consider the many ways in which Buddhists have understood human suffering, life after death, karma, the nature of the world and human's place within it, and the path to enlightenment.

Our emphasis will be on attempting to understand the moral values, philosophical insights, ritual practices, and social concerns that have shaped Buddhism over centuries of dynamic change in diverse cultural contexts. We will examine not only the history of Buddhism and its three-fold division into Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana/Tantrayana, but also facets of the contemporary practice of Buddhism in the United States and the role of socially engaged Buddhism. In addition to some textbook readings, reading assignments will privilege primary source readings in order to introduce students directly to the narrative, doctrinal, liturgical, and biographical texts that inform our knowledge of what it has meant to live a Buddhist life over time and across cultures.

As an academic course in the Department of Religious Studies, this course draws on scholarly approaches to the study of religion to examine the history of Buddhist thought and practice. In doing so, the course neither presumes nor prescribes any religious commitment on the part of students, but rather encourages students to cultivate an eagerness to learn about a cultural and religious tradition that may be very different from their own.

230-0-20

Introduction to Judaism

Barry Wimpfheimer, MWF 10-10:50am, Fisk 217

This course attempts to answer the questions, "What is Judaism?" and "Who is a Jew?" by surveying the broad arc of Jewish history, reviewing the practices and beliefs that have defined and continue to define Judaism as a religion, sampling the vast treasure of Jewish literatures and analyzing the unique social conditions that have made the cultural experience of Jewishness so significant. The class will employ an historical structure to trace the evolutions of Jewish literature, religion and culture through the ages.

270-0-20

Introduction to Theology: Thought, Reality, and God

Christine Helmer, MWF 11-11:50am, Swift 107

Theology is an academic discipline with a long history that asks fundamental questions about religious experience, understanding, and practice. What does it mean to be human in relation to another thought to be more than human? How are the relationships among self, world, and god (or gods) understood at different times and places? How is individual religious experience coordinated (or not) with institutional realities and community expectations and authority? And how do scholars develop critical and self-reflective tools to examine these questions?

This course takes as its case study Christian traditions of understanding the divine-human relationship as these have developed over time. Of particular concern is to consider the ways that Western philosophical traditions, from Platonism to existentialism and beyond, informed Christian theological thought. We will engage the thought of Friedrich Schleiermacher, the "parent of modern theology," at various points along the way.

The course is organized around five basic concepts and questions. 1) the **conditions** for doing theology; 2) the **givens** that inform any Christian theology; 3) theology's "**transcendentals**," or values that ground all reality; 4) **the personal experiences that orient theologians and theologies**; and 5) **God**.

With no pretensions about the "queen of the sciences," this course asks how theology, as understood via these five categories, may contribute to, learn from, and critically engage the thinkers and issues most urgent to our own times

318-0-20

Topics in East Asian Religions: Goddess Traditions South Asia

Sarah Jacoby, Tu 2-4:50pm, Annenberg G32

This course aims to introduce some of the most important female divinities who inhabit the religious universe of South Asia, in particular within Hinduism and Buddhism in India, Nepal, and Tibet. Central questions running through the course include: What are the forms and functions of female divinities in South Asia? What is the relationship (if any) between the ritual veneration of female divinities and the status of human women in South Asian societies with strong traditions of goddess worship? Is there a correlation between powerful female divinities and the gender roles and social status of human women who propitiate them? The course will investigate a variety of different female divinities including yoginis, yaksinis, dakinis, devis, kumaris, and female bodhisattvas with an eye toward understanding their significance for the women and men who held them sacred. Course materials will include visual representations, liturgies, narratives, ethnographies, and studies related to the goddess traditions of South Asia, ranging in time from ancient cults to contemporary practices.

319-0-20

Topics in Buddhism: Buddhist Auto/biography

Sarah Jacoby, F 10-1pm, Crowe 4-136

In the middle of the twentieth century, cutting-edge literary theorists concluded that autobiography was exclusively a product of "Western" individualistic culture, thereby ignoring the literary output of large parts of the globe, including the Buddhist religious literature of Tibet and East Asia. The goal of this course is to explore Buddhist biography and autobiography as literary genres and as lenses through which we can examine the various meanings of living an exemplary Buddhist life, focusing on religious literature from India and Tibet.

Questions the course will probe include: How did a religious doctrine such as Buddhism, which denies the ultimate existence of the self, become a major locus of auto/biographical writing? What is the nature of the self as it is expressed in Buddhist religious auto/biography, and what were the aims of this literature? What can we learn from reading biographies and autobiographies about Buddhist selves, societies, and histories? How do differences of gender, nationality, and religious lineage inform auto/biographical representations of the self?

Course readings will be 1) English translations of Indian and Tibetan biographies and autobiographies and 2) theoretical approaches to the study of biography and autobiography drawn from a diverse array of literary theorists including Bakhtin, Gusdorf, Lejeune, and Bruner. Through reading primary source literature and theoretical essays hand-in-hand, classroom discussions will explore the relevance of Western literary theory for the study of Buddhist auto/biography while paying close attention to the narrative themes and tropes found in Buddhist auto/biography.

331-0-20

Classical Jewish Thought

Dou Weiss, JFH 11-12:20pm, Kresge 4-425

This seminar will explore the distinctive thought of the rabbis of the Talmud and Midrash (2nd c. -8th c. C.E.) Our primary emphasis will be on theological matters as we ask (for the rabbis): Who is God? Why did God create the world? What happened at the moment of Revelation? What does God's justice system look like? And, finally, what happens after we die? To highlight the distinctiveness of these rabbinic conceptions, we will contrast them with (earlier) biblical views and (later) medieval Jewish ones. Consideration will be given not only to content, but to form, exegesis and historical context.

339-0-20

Topics in Judaism: Gender and Judaism

Barry Wimpfheimer, JTh 3:30-4:50pm, Parkes 215

This course is designed to examine Judaism through the prism of gender. We will explore both the (seemingly) inherent gendering of Jewish religion, literature and culture as well as the ways in which Jews in different periods have adapted the tradition to reflect contemporaneous ideas about: sexual difference, the respective roles of men and women, the human body and sexuality. Much of the course will focus on classical Jewish literatures (the Bible, Rabbinic literature, Kabbalah); considerable time will also be spent on Jewish modernity-particularly on the Jewish origins of Austrian psychoanalysis and American feminism.

359-0-20

Topics in Islam: Islam in Modernity

Muhammad Umar, J 2-5pm, Crowe 4-136

This course examines the worldwide transformation of Islamic cultures and societies in the modern period, starting with a brief historical development of Islamic traditions and their interface with the basic dynamics of modern world history. The challenges of modernity to Islamic traditions will be examined in the context of Muslims' encounters with Western European Powers during the nineteenth century. A survey of religious reforms in the Islamic world before and during the encounters with modern Europe will provide the background for understanding Muslims' responses to the challenges of modernity. Specific case-studies of selected number of Muslim countries will shed light on the religious dimensions of modernization of Islamic societies in the twentieth century. Close examination of contemporary Islamic discourses will help to answer theoretical questions on the relationships between religion and modernity.

369-0-20/Amer-St 301-3

Topics in American Religion: Teenage Rites of Passage

Sarah Taylor, Th 2-5pm, University 019

This seminar is specially geared to American Studies and Religious Studies majors. Drawing from anthropological and sociological case studies, we will examine various rites of passage experienced by teens in North America. In analyzing these rites, students will become conversant with theories of ritual, contemporary surveys of teen demographics and cultural trends, gender studies and cultural studies literature dealing with teen popular media and consumption. Students will also be asked to generate original research for their seminar final project, applying the tools of the course to a case study of their own choosing. This seminar will make rigorous use of multimedia materials and will require multi-source digitized media viewing and analysis as integral to course assignments. Attendance is required at the first meeting of seminar in order to be admitted to the course and subsequently each week thereafter.

374-0-20

Contemporary Religious Thought: Spiritual Vision in Action

Beverly Mortensen, TH 3:30-4:50pm, Kresge 4-310

This course addresses the way a spiritual path can affect one's everyday life. Most paths are truly radical in the demands they make upon the follower's mindset and behavior. Students will read books that speak to this matter from several wisdom traditions. They, of course, will discuss and write about these ideas.

379-0-21/His 300-49

Topics in Comparative Religion: Jewish & Christian Responses

Dean Bell, Th 5-8pm, University 102

Natural disasters have plagued all societies. In the form of such catastrophes as earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, fires, plagues, storms, climate changes, floods, and droughts, nature and the environment have from time to time wreaked havoc on human communities, affected the trajectory of history, and elicited a broad range of responses. In this course, we examine Jewish and Christian responses to natural disasters and environmental changes in European history since the Middle Ages. We pay specific attention to the impact of such events on Jewish and Christian communities and society and the religious, social, and political responses of those affected. We also explore what such responses might tell us more generally about Jewish and Christian societies and their interactions throughout European history. This course allows us to contextualize changing environmental conditions and the occurrence of natural disasters today and to consider how the lessons of the past may help to inform responses now and in the future.