

INTRODUCTION TO RELIGIONS: AFRICAN RELIGIONS & BUDDHISM
RELIGION 100

Emory College
 Mon/Wed/Fri 9:35-10:25

Fall 2008
 White Hall 110

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COURSE SYLLABUS

This course will introduce African Religions and Buddhism using approaches within the academic study of religion. We will cover the contexts and development of each tradition/ orientation, examining narratives about founding communities and persons as well as grounding mythologies and customs with emphasis upon the transition from local to regional and transnational traditions. Examining how each tradition/orientation views the human condition, course materials will explore sources and obstacles to thriving and meaning-making as well as their understandings of suffering and purposeful life. Exploring religious practices from each context, we will study rituals, religious performances, sacred narratives, philosophies and ethical decision-making.

Our study of African religions examines the foundations of African thought, ethics, religious customs and practices via the indigenous religious traditions of select sub-Saharan African peoples, including the Yoruba, Mende, Fon and Kongo. In so doing, we will engage important theoretical and methodological issues that have emerged in the study of African religions.

Our study of Buddhism examines how initial teachings became institutionalized doctrines and practices regulated by identified religious leadership, and how and who resisted or inverted these institutional norms. Contemporary lives and expressions of Buddhist teachings and practices will help us understand how ancient religious traditions reconstruct themselves to survive in new contexts and address religious needs.

This effort of collaborative teaching-learning experience is an experiment. Studying two large religious groups, African Religions and Buddhism, we will test current scholarly approaches to determine if they actually increase our understanding and insights of the traditions:

- Do the tools used by today's scholars of religion, their ways of gathering information, and their analytical categories function effectively and appropriately?

- Are alternative knowledges available when non-indigenous categories and methods are used?
- To what degree can contemporary theories and tools of Religious Studies enrich our study and learning of these non-“Abrahamic” (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) traditions?
- Do contemporary approaches in Religious Studies make assumptions that are ill equipped for the study African Religions and Buddhism?

The course takes on this challenge by exploring these two traditions using traditional modes of scholarship, indigenous scholarship, analysis of religious practices, media, texts, guest speakers who practice these religions, and our discussions and assignments. By using a comparative approach we highlight the differences in these two religious groups while discovering common struggles they share with the interpretive assumptions made by traditional approaches used by Religious Studies. Using specific themes as lenses to compare African and Buddhist religious cultures will also deepen our learning.

Course Requirements

1) CLASS PARTICIPATION: (15% of final grade). Regular attendance is required in order to pass this class. **Without official written excuses from a College official or from a physician, more than four (4) absences will result in the reduction of your final grade by one grade level. For example, a final letter grade of (B) would be reduced to a (B-).** In order to facilitate productive discussion and engagement of the course materials, students will be asked to relate their questions and comments to the assigned readings.

The following guidelines will also help students to prepare for the class discussion:

1. Spend time before each class preparing for discussion by making notes in your texts or on a separate sheet of paper pertaining to specific passages from the readings that you want to discuss.
2. During class discussions, when raising a question or point about the assigned readings, make specific references to texts, authors and page numbers in question.
3. When responding to the questions or comments of fellow students try to listen carefully to your interlocutor's question/position. Try not to make assumptions about your interlocutor's intentions or motivations. When necessary, ask your interlocutor to clarify or restate her/his position. If you intend to refute or challenge the position of your interlocutor, try to support your own position by referring to the assigned readings and other course materials.

2) MID-TERM EXAMINATION: (25% of final grade). A mid-term examination is scheduled for Monday, October 20. The exam will cover the material studied up to that point in the semester. Students must read the assigned material in order to pass the exam. Preparation guidelines for the mid-term examination will be distributed on October 3.

3) INTEGRATIVE WRITING EXERCISE (30% of final grade). A 3-page writing exercise is due Wednesday, November 12 by 9:35 AM. Guidelines will be distributed in class on October 22.

4) FINAL EXAMINATION: (30% of final grade). The final examination will be related comprehensively to the assigned readings, course materials and class discussions with an emphasis on post mid-term examination materials. Your performance will be enhanced if you are able to complete the reading assignments on time. **(THE FINAL EXAM IS DESIGNED SO THAT YOU WILL NOT PASS IT IF YOU DO NOT READ THE ASSIGNED MATERIALS).** Students will receive preparation guidelines on November 21. **The final exam will be held on Wednesday, December 17, 4:30-7:00 PM, Venue TBA.**

5) CLASS ENVIRONMENT: The class environment is an intimate, vulnerable and personal space where students are constantly asked to share opinions. Students must show respect for one another at all

times. You may not agree with another's position; you may not even respect some of the viewpoints offered by others; but you **must** respect the person as a contributing member of the class.

6) THE HONOR CODE IS A COMMUNAL RESPONSIBILITY AT EMORY. VIOLATIONS WILL BE REPORTED TO APPROPRIATE OFFICIALS.

Criteria for Evaluation

- accuracy and precision of scholarship/academic work
- creativity, critical judgment and imagination
- contribution to the class discussion
- timely completion of written assignments

Writing Tips:

1) When preparing for discussion, and especially when writing papers, do not make unsupported assertions. Try to present the most convincing case for your argument. Think carefully and thoroughly about the evidence you will use to support your position. Always anticipate opposing critiques of your position and opposing arguments. Try to answer or address opposing positions as you present your own position. This will demonstrate that you are aware of alternative viewpoints and that you are capable of proposing and defending a thesis.

2) Your written work should not be first-draft presentations of your thoughts. When writing papers, allow yourself ample time to read the assigned materials and to consult appropriate sources before making final decisions about your thesis statement and the supporting evidence that will provide structure for your argument and conclusion. For example, you might begin writing your final paper by making very strong statements about a point you aim to defend. However, in consulting the works of scholars in the field, you may see the need to modify your original thesis, or you may be compelled to abandon it altogether. This is to be expected in scholarly research and writing. You should not feel reluctant to change your argument if your reasons for changing it are more convincing than your original reasons for posing it. Just be sure that in the *final paper* (the draft that you hand in to be graded) your thesis statement is consistent with your argument (supporting evidence) and conclusion.

3) Please take advantage of all the resources available to you when writing your papers. Never hesitate to ask reference librarians for help in trying to locate scholarly sources. Never hesitate to ask course instructors for extra help in thinking through your ideas for your papers.

4) Utilize Emory University's Writing Center. The Center provides writing tutors who can help you to organize your thoughts, review your paper drafts and improve your writing skills. **CONTACT INFORMATION: 727-0886; <http://www.writingcenter.emory.edu/>**

5) Although late papers are almost never acceptable, do not refrain from communicating with course instructors about any difficulty that might prevent you from completing assignments on time. It is better to let us know than to avoid contact or conversation, even if the problem is time management or procrastination.

6) This syllabus is designed to guide you as you make your best attempt to complete the requirements for the course. Please refer to appropriate sections before turning in your papers.

7) Use the writing tips and criteria for evaluation to assess your work before submitting it for a grade. We encourage you to do this even if you are less than satisfied with the quality of your work. This will help you to keep a conscious record of your strengths and weaknesses, especially regarding academic discipline. Students will also receive a **paper composition checklist with paper guidelines**. **The checklist must be submitted with your papers (stapled as the first page).**

Students with Disabilities

If you experience any disability that requires individual adaptation in order to complete the requirements for this course, and/or to meet with course instructors, please feel free to speak with us so that appropriate accommodations may be arranged.

BOOKS FOR PURCHASE: (AT EMORY BOOK STORE)

1. John Mbiti, Introduction to African Religion
2. Kola Abimbola, Yorùbá Culture: A Philosophical Account
3. Lama Dalai, Freedom from Exile: The Autobiography of The Dalai Lama
4. Keila Diehl, Echoes from Dharamsala: Music in the Life of a Tibetan Refugee Community
5. Donald Lopez, The Story of Buddhism

ALL REMAINING MATERIALS WILL BE ON RESERVES DIRECT

Schedule of Readings (subject to change)

August 29: Introduction to the Course

September 1: NO CLASS, LABOR DAY HOLIDAY

September 3: How Do We Study Religion?

Jonathon Z. Smith, "Religion, Religions, Religious," in Mark Taylor ed., Critical Terms for Religious Studies, 269-284 **RD**

September 5: Discussion

Distribute African Countries/Territories—Fact Finding Assignment

September 8: Toward Definitions of Buddhism: Contexts and Existent Religious Traditions

Lopez, The Story of Buddhism, 1-18 **B**

September 10: Buddhism: Cosmologies

Lopez, The Story of Buddhism, 19-36 **B**

September 12: African Religion(s) and the Problem of Definition

Laurenti Magesa, African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life, 4-28 **RD**

September 15: Toward Definitions of African Religion(s)

John Mbiti, Introduction to African Religion, 1-33 **B/R/RD**

Eboussi Boulaga: Video Clip, (18 minutes, Lecture Presentation, College of the Holy Cross, December 1998)

DUE: POSTED INFORMATION ON AFRICAN COUNTRIES

Distribute Buddhist Countries/Territories—Fact Finding Assignment

September 17: Redefining the Buddha

Lopez, The Story of Buddhism, 37-42; 83-92 **B**

September 19: The Unexpected Buddha

Khoroché (trans), Once The Buddha Was a Monkey (24. "The Great Ape," 25. "The Ibex," 26. "The Antelope," 27. "The King of the Monkeys"), from the Arya Sura Jatakamala, 167-192 **RD**

Lopez, The Story of Buddhism, 92-101 **B**

September 22: African Religious Studies and "Translational Understanding"

Robin Horton, Patterns of Thought in Africa and The West: Essays on Magic, Religion and Science, 186-193 **R/RD**

September 24: Omorisa: The Global Yoruba Community

Kola Abimbola, Yoruba Culture: A Philosophical Account, 21-46 **B**

VIDEO: YORUBA COSMOLOGY, RELIGION & ART (15 minutes)

September 26: Buddha as Philosophical Body; Schools of Buddhism

Lopez, The Story of Buddhism, 59-83 **B**

September 29: Dharma as Medicine: The Four Noble Truths

Lecturer: Howell Belser, Doctoral Candidate, GDR

Lopez, The Story of Buddhism, 42-54 **B**

Harvey, Peter, An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics, 30-49 **RD**

DUE: POSTED INFORMATION ON BUDDHIST COUNTRIES

October 1: Yoruba Cosmology

Lecturer: Ashley Coleman, Doctoral Candidate, GDR

Kola Abimbola, Yoruba Culture: A Philosophical Account, 47-76 **B**

October 3: Yoruba Medicine and Ethics

Kola Abimbola, Yoruba Culture: A Philosophical Account, 77-105 **B**

VIDEO: BABA DR. WANDE ABIMBOLA, IFA DIVINATION (10 minutes)

DISTRIBUTE MIDTERM EXAM GUIDELINES

October 6: Dharma as Interpretation

Lopez, The Story of Buddhism, 103-129 B

October 8: Dharma Medicine: Insight and Healing
Guest Speaker: Geshe Lobsang Negi

Movie: 'Doing Time, Doing Vipassana' – White Hall 101 – 6:00 p.m.

October 10: Meditation as Institutional Medicine

Discussion of film, 'Doing Time, Doing Vipassana'

October 13: NO CLASS, FALL BREAK

October 15: Guest Speaker: Iyalosa Omolewa Orisagbemi (Priestess of Obatala)

October 17: Yoruba Religion: Discussion

October 20: MID-TERM EXAMINATION

October 22: The Mende Sande Society: Religion, Gender, and Initiation
Lecturer: Ashley Coleman, Doctoral Candidate, GDR

Syliva Ardyn Boone, Radiance of the Waters, 13-23 RD/R

DISTRIBUTE INTEGRATIVE WRITING EXERCISE GUIDELINES

October 24: The Mende Sande Society: The Ideal Path to Womanhood

Syliva Ardyn Boone, Radiance of the Waters, 23-43 RD/R

October 27: Sangha as Exile Community: Initiation – New Symbols

The Dalai Lama, Freedom in Exile, 1-16; 42-57; 88-93; 98 (middle) – 100 B

October 29: Sangha as Exile Community: Initiation – New Symbols

The Dalai Lama, Freedom in Exile, 134-159; 161-175; 238-262; 270-271 B

October 31: The Mende Sande Society: Discussion

Review relevant reading assignments and prepare one question/comment for discussion.

November 3: **Critical Reflection and Writing in the field of Religious Studies**
Lecturer: Ben Brazil

IN CLASS WRITING SESSION: INTEGRATIVE EXERCISE

MOVIE: Voodoo Secrets- White Hall 110 – 6:00 p.m. (Please write a one page response for use in class on November 14.)

November 5: **Vodun: Philosophical Foundations & Artistic Expressions**

Suzanne Preston Blier, African Vodun: Art, Psychology & Power, 37-54 (“Vodun: The Philosophical Roots of Art”—from Chapter 1) **RD/R**

November 7: **Sangha as Art and Community**
Academic Writing in Religious Studies: Ben Brazil, Doctoral Candidate,
 GDR

Diehl, Echoes from Dharamsala, 68-100 **B**

November 10: **Sangha As Art and Community**

Diehl, Echoes from Dharamsala, 178-186; 190-197; 203-206; 263-270 **B**

November 12: **Vodun: Material Culture and the Capacity to Use Power Dynamically**

Suzanne Preston Blier, African Vodun: Art, Psychology & Power, 74-94 (“Vodun: The Philosophical Roots of Art”—from Chapter 2) **RD/R**

INTEGRATIVE EXERCISE PAPER DUE IN CLASS

November 14: **Vodun: Discussion**

Review relevant reading assignments and your one-page reflection on film Voodoo Secrets and prepare one question/comment for discussion.

November: 17: **Sangha: Community as Mandala**

Reading on Mandala

November 19: **Sangha: Community as Mandala**

Film on making Mandala

November 21: **Mapping the Kongo Universe: Cosmology and the Cycle of Life**
Guest Speaker: Dr. Modeste Malu Nyimi, Visiting Fulbright Scholar

Fu-Kiau Bunseki, African Cosmology of the Bantu Kongo: Principles of Life and Living, 22-43
 ("Mapping the Universe"—from Chapter 1) **RD/R**

DISTRIBUTE FINAL EXAMINATION GUIDELINES

November 24: **Kongo Approaches to Mystery: 'Deep' Communication**
Guest Speaker: Dr. Modeste Malu Nyimi, Visiting Fulbright Scholar

Fu-Kiau Bunseki, African Cosmology of the Bantu Kongo: Principles of Life and Living, 113-126
 ("Hearing is Seeing, and Seeing Is Reacting/Feeling: Waimona, ye mona I sunsumuka" & "Is that
 Magic? Ket'I Muyeke?"—from Chapter 3) **RD/R**

November 26: **Buddhism as Mystical/Apocalyptic Tradition**

Thurman, Essential Tibetan Buddhism, 9-13 **RD**

December 1: **Buddhism as Mystical/Apocalyptic Tradition**

Thurman, Essential Tibetan Buddhism, 13-25 **RD**

December 3: **Kongo Mystical Thought: Personal, Collective, and Cosmic
 Avenues to New Horizons**

Fu-Kiau Bunseki, African Cosmology of the Bantu Kongo: Principles of Life and Living, 127-150
RD/R

December 5: **Kongo Mystical Thought: Discussion**

Review relevant reading assignments and prepare one question/comment for discussion.

December 8: **Discussion: Religion Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow**

The final exam will be held on Wednesday, December 17, 4:30-7:00