

JULY 2009

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Phone consultation by appointment

“Contemporary Hinduism”
Online Course – Fall 2009

Introduction

Arguably the world’s most ancient contemporary religion, tracing its roots back at least 3500 years, Hinduism is also the world’s third largest faith in practice today. It is an increasing segment of the American religious landscape, and many non-Hindu practitioners have found in it beliefs and spiritual disciplines that resonate with their own.

This course will provide a graduate-level survey of the Hindu faith, examining its history, theology, sacred texts, spiritual practices, social organization, and politics. Its basic methodology will be historical, beginning at the earliest phases of the religion and moving forward, but also topical, grouping together important themes that run throughout the faith.

As an online course, the required reading and writing will be significant but manageable – you should plan for and expect 7-10 hours of work per week for this course. Grading, explained further at the end of this syllabus, will include online posts, a field research project, and a term paper.

It is my intention that by the end of the term you will have gained a solid graduate-level understanding of this important world religion, and also have had the opportunity to reflect on and deepen your own sense of spirituality.

Course Schedule

Week 1 Historical Antecedents and the Vedic Religion

This unit explores the historical antecedents and context of early Hinduism, looking at the melding of Dravidian and Aryan cultures. Grounded in this history, we’ll turn our attention to the earliest beliefs of the Hindu faith, the faith rooted in the scripture known as The Vedas.

Reading Assignment: Rodrigues -- Introduction and Chapter One
Michell -- Chapter One
Hawley -- Chapter Sixteen

Week 2 Holy Texts: The Upanishads and Vedanta Philosophy

The Vedas form the core of ancient Hinduism's sacred scriptures. During this unit we will read translations from The Upanishads, a Vedic scripture, and explore how the philosophy that emerges from this text is the corner stone of the modern-day Vedanta movement. This unit will also be our first introduction to the Hindu 'paths of faith' through the concept of 'jyana yoga' – the path of intellectual spirituality.

Reading Assignment: Prabhavananda -- entire
Rodrigues -- Chapter Twelve and pp. 316-317

DUE: Optional Extra Credit 2 page paper on Ramakrishna

Week 3 The Order of Things: Hindu Cosmology and Social Organization

Hinduism creates a rich and complex cosmology and social order that explains not only our precise individual role in creation, but also why that role exists. Key to understanding this comprehensive world-view are the concepts of karma and the caste system.

Reading Assignment: Rodrigues -- Chapters Two and Three
Huyler -- Chapter One

DUE: 1 page or less proposal for Hindu Temple field research paper

Week 4 Responsibilities of the Individual: Dharma and Ashrama

Continuing our examination of the Hindu world order, we'll turn to the religion's expectations of individuals within the faith. The concept of dharma defines one's religious obligation in relation to caste, and ashrama defines one's dharma in relation to life stage. We'll explore how these two concepts work in tandem in defining one's moral duty as an individual.

Reading Assignment: Rodrigues -- Chapter Four
Huyler -- Chapter Two
Hawley -- Chapter Four

Week 5 The Many Gods of Hinduism: The Puranas

Hinduism is known for its plethora of gods, goddesses, and demons. Continuing our exploration of Hindu devotionism, this unit expands our knowledge of the Hindu pantheon, examining the major gods that define the Hindu faith, and the category of scripture that contain their stories, The Puranas ('The Ancients').

Reading Assignment: Rodrigues -- Chapter Ten
 Huyler -- Chapter Seven
 Michell -- pp. 20-36

Week 6 Hindu Sects: Vaishnavite, Shivite, Shakti-centered, and Tantric Hinduism

As with the other major religions, Hinduism encompasses several major 'traditions,' traditions with different religious foci and clusters of believers. Examining the four major traditions, we will look at their different textures, but also how they all exist in harmony and even in interdependence. This unit begins our examination of 'bhakti yoga' – the path of devotionism, of religiosity expressed through the love of God.

Reading Assignment: Rodrigues -- Chapter Thirteen
 Huyler -- Chapter Five

DUE: Optional Extra Credit 2 page paper on Hindu Gods

Week 7 Sacred Art and Worship: Darshan

The central facet of Hindu devotion is the act of worship, typically taking place either at home or in ornate temples. We will examine the symbolism, iconography, and art of Hindu temples. We will also explore the act of worship – how it takes place and what it symbolizes – the act of 'darshan,' of being seen by God.

Reading Assignment: Michell -- pp. 36-76
 Rodrigues -- pp. 227-243

Weeks 8-9 Holy Texts: The Ramayana

A story revolving around the Hindu god, Ram, the Hindu scripture known as The Ramayana ('Ram's Story') is held as sacred not only in South Asia (India, Nepal, Sri Lanka) but also throughout much of South-East Asia, including Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand, among others. To understand the Ramayana is to understand a major world text. This unit will introduce us to the major contours of this text, examining it in a lived, sociological context; we will explore how this text and its central figures inform Hindu morality.

Reading Assignment: Rodrigues -- pp. 136-143 (week 8)
 Narayan -- Chapters One thru Seven (week 8)
 Narayan -- Chapter Eight thru Epilogue (week 9)

DUE (week 8): 5-6 page field research paper on a Hindu Temple

Week 10 Holy Texts: The Mahabharata and The Bhagavad Gita

We next move into our examination of the Hindu scripture known as The Mahabharata ('The Great War'), which serves as a treatise on conflict and the act of war. After a brief overview of this larger text we will turn our attention to a specific chapter of The Mahabharata known as The Bhagavad Gita.

Reading Assignment: Rodrigues -- pp. 144-150
Rodrigues -- Chapter Eight

DUE: 1 page or less proposal for course term paper; in addition, please set up a phone appointment with me to discuss your term paper proposal

Week 11 Holy Texts: The Bhagavad Gita (Continued)

The Bhagavad Gita ('God's Song,' also referred to as The Gita, "The Song," for short) is a nuanced text exploring the necessity of war, but it also serves as one of Hinduism's most beautiful articulations on 'karma yoga' – the path of action, the path of living spirituality amidst complexity. We look this week at both the concept of karma yoga as well as Krishna's religious justifications for violence.

Reading Assignment: Miller -- entire

Week 12 Orthopraxis and Religious Reform:
Hindu Responses to Buddhism, Islam, and British Colonialism

Particularly as a result of competing philosophies and/or external pressures, Hindu reform movements have, over centuries, attempted to address and change some of the deep structural oppressions and inequities imbedded in the faith. This unit will explore a few of the major forces of reform (Buddhism, Islam, and British Colonialism) and several key Hindu reformers.

Reading Assignment: Rodrigues -- Chapter Fourteen
Hawley -- Chapter Thirteen

Week 13 Contemporary Hindu Festivals

In this unit we turn to contemporary Hindu celebrations through an examination of a few of the major holidays honored by most Hindus, including Diwali, Holi,

and Ramlila. In addition, we will read about some regional Hindu celebrations, their contour and experience.

Reading Assignment: Hawley -- Chapters Six thru Eight
Huyler -- Chapter Six

Week 14 Hindu Politics

In this final unit we turn our attention to the political realities of Hinduism. Over the past twenty years there has been a tremendous rise in Hindu fundamentalism. We will explore the beliefs around which this fundamentalism is organized, as well as the social realities that are fueling them. We will then, in turn, consider the implications of this fundamentalism, both for India and the West.

Reading Assignment: Hawley -- Chapters Seventeen thru Twenty

DUE (by the last day of Starr King's reading period): Course term paper

Required Texts

Hawley, J.S. & Narayan V. (2006). *The Life of Hinduism*. University of California Press. ISBN: 520249143.

Huyler, S. (2002). *Meeting God: Elements of Hindu Devotion*. Yale University Press. ISBN: 0300089058.

Michell, G. (1988). *The Hindu Temple: An Introduction to Its Meaning and Forms*. The University of Chicago Press. ISBN: 0226532305.

Miller, B., trans. (1986). *The Bhagavad-Gita: Krishna's Counsel in a Time of War*. Bantam Classics. ISBN: 0553213652.

Narayan, R. (2006). *The Ramayana: A Shortened Modern Prose Version of the Indian Epic*. ISBN: 0143039679.

Prabhavananda, S. & Manchester, F., trans. (2002). *The Upanishads: Breath of the Eternal*. Signet Classics. ISBN: 0451528484.

Rodrigues, H. (2006). *Introducing Hinduism*. Routledge. ISBN: 0415392691.

(NOTE: Older/used editions of the required texts can be obtained quite cheaply, in most but not all cases, through sites such as Amazon.com. Please feel free to shop around and check with me if you are unsure whether a particular edition you have found is acceptable for the course.)

Grading

You final course grade will be determined on a point scale as follows:

140 possible points = Weekly participation in online discussions/posts centered around our readings. This portion of your grade will be determined by the depth of knowledge you are able to display about our readings and the depth of your reflection on them, as demonstrated through your weekly posts. **Each of your weekly postings will earn up to 10 points.** Guidelines for how to do well in this part of the class will be given, and each student will receive personalized feedback as appropriate and upon request. I will support your ‘virtual’ learning by posting weekly reflections/lectures online *after* your weekly posts on the reading assignment have been submitted. My weekly reflection/lecture will respond to topics and queries raised through the student postings; I will additionally offer my synthesizing analysis of the reading material.

50 possible points = Participation in a course project involving a visit to a local Hindu temple, and a 5-6 page analysis of that visit in relation to the course material. Detailed guidelines will be given early in the course. In the event you do not live near a Hindu temple, have accessibility or other compelling reasons, an alternate research project will be made available. Because this is a field research component, the alternative of a book-based research project is discouraged, and will not be approved for any student who can reasonably complete the field work. This project can be worked on over several weeks, but **papers will be due after we complete our units on worship and sacred art, by the last day of week 8.**

100 possible points = A term paper of approximately 10-12 pages in length, standard format with endnotes and bibliography. You have the freedom here to explore, with instructor approval, any area of further interest in the field of Hinduism that you would like to research. I will assist you by advising on the feasibility of your inquiry, and by suggesting, as useful, some preliminary resources to investigate. High scoring papers will reflect a cumulative knowledge of the course material and tackle an original thesis, using both books and journal articles. (In other words, the thesis is not a reiteration of an existing book, chapter, or article.) **Term paper proposals (1 page or less) are due by the end of week 10 and the final paper is due at the end of Starr King’s fall semester reading period.**

5 possible points each = Two optional short extra credit papers, approx. 2 pages in length, **one due at the end of week 2 the other at the end of week 6.** Further instructions on these extra credit assignments will be given. I recommend that you consider these short assignments as a way of boosting your grade; there will be no other extra credit possibilities.

The final course grading scale will be as follows:

290-261 = A

260-232 = B

231-203 = C