REL 140: Encountering World Religions

Buddhism, Christianity and Islam and the Encounter with Modernity

Section 01: MWF 11:00-11:50; Room: HUM 304
Section 02: MWF 1:00-1:50; Room: HUM 304

Online syllabus: http://personal-pages.lvc.edu/~robbins/REL140.htm

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Course Description:
This course will examine three of the world’s major religious traditions in their respective encounters with modernity. Students will be introduced to the basic histories, beliefs and practices of these religions, as well as the basic features and trends of modernization and globalism. Students will be asked to reflect upon how the given religious traditions have been altered, revamped, transformed, and/or reinterpreted in accordance with the changing cultural contexts of the modern world. The goal for the course is at least threefold: 1) to introduce students to the critical, comparative study of religion; 2) to explore the role of religion in the modern world; and 3) to learn how better to read and analyze modern religious texts.

Textbooks:
- Ethics for the New Millennium, Dalai Lama (Riverhead, 1999)
- Why Christianity Must Change or Die, by John Shelby Spong (Harper San Francisco, 1998)
- Following Muhammad: Rethinking Islam in the Contemporary World, by Carl Ernst (UNC Press, 2003)

Requirements/Grading:
- **Exams (worth 50% of final grade)** – a total of 3 exams will be given, each corresponding to a chapter from the World Religions Today textbook. Exams will combine objective (multiple choice, true/false, matching) and short answer questions.
- **Papers (worth 30% of final grade)** – students will be required to write 3 short (2-4 pages) papers on the following:
  - **Paper #1**: In Ethics for the New Millennium, the Dalai Lama, writing from a Buddhist perspective, argues for a moral system based on “universal” rather than “religious” principles. What does the Dalai Lama mean by this distinction? What does he see as the true nature of the challenge of modernity? And how does he help us better confront the specific challenges of the modern world?
  - **Paper #2**: In Why Christianity Must Change or Die, Bishop Spong argues that Christian belief needs to be radically reinterpreted in order for it to be credible in the modern world. Do you think his reinterpretation succeeds? Why or why not?
  - **Paper #3**: In Following Muhammad, Carl Ernst provides a sympathetic yet analytical view of contemporary Islam, specifically focusing on the many critical issues that modern-day Muslims face. Your paper should focus on two or three of these critical issues in order to analyze the continuing relevance of Islam.
- **Attendance/Participation (worth 20% of final grade)** – Occasional in-class and homework assignments will be required that will help to determine the final participation grade. Each student is entitled to one unexcused absence. Every absence thereafter will result in a half-letter deduction from the total participation grade.
Schedule:
9/1 Introductions

Part I: Religion and Modernity
9/3 Introductions
9/6 Understanding Religion View The Long Search
9/8 Defining Modernity Read World Religions Today (WRT), pp 3-24
9/10 Discussion Questions Read WRT, pp. 24-35

Part II: Buddhism in the Modern World
9/13 Introduction to Buddhism View The Long Search
9/15 History of Buddhism Read WRT, pp. 353-394
9/17 Buddhism and Modernity Read WRT, pp. 394-428
9/20 Discussion Questions WRT, 426-427
9/22 No Class – SAGA Teach-in
9/24 Exam #2
9/27 The problem of modernity View Kundun
9/29 The foundation for ethics Read Ethics, pp. xi-34
10/1 “Ethics and the Individual” Read Ethics, pp. 35-78
10/4 “Ethics and Society” Read Ethics, pp. 79-158
10/6 Paper #1 is Due

Part III: Christianity in the Modern World
10/11 Introduction to Christianity View The Protestant Spirit
10/13 History of Christianity Read WRT, pp. 37-70
10/15 Christianity and Modernity Read WRT, pp. 70-106
10/18 Discussion Questions WRT, 105-106
10/20 Exam #3
10/22 “Meaning of Exile” Read Change or Die pp. ix-42
10/25 No class – Fall break
10/27 “Beyond Theism ” Read Change or Die pp. 43-70
10/29 “What Think Ye of Christ?” Read Change or Die pp. 71-133
11/1 Prayer, Ethics, and the Future Church Read Change or Die pp. 134-228
11/3 Paper #2 is Due

Part IV: Islam in the Modern World
11/5 Introduction to Islam View Islam in America
11/8 History of Islam Read WRT, pp. 181-229
11/10 Islam and Modernity Read WRT, pp. 229-269
11/12 Discussion Questions WRT, 267-268
11/15 Exam #4
11/17 Islam and the West Following, pp. xiii-36
11/19 Islam and Religion Following, pp. 37-70
11/22-26 No Class – Thanksgiving Break
11/29 Sacred Sources of Islam Following, pp. 71-106
12/1 Islam and Ethics Following, pp. 107-139
12/3 Liberal Islam Following, pp. 139-162
12/6 Sufism Following, pp. 163-198
12/8 Postscript Following, pp. 199-214
12/10 Paper #3 is Due