

Syllabus - Religion 102: Ways of Religion

James R. Lewis (“Jim”)

Office: 409 ccc

Office Hours: 4:00-5:00 Thursdays

Departmental Phone: 346-3340

Home Phone: 343-1908 (Never call early in the day; I’m out of town Monday-Wednesday)

E-mail: jlewis@uwsp.edu (A good way to contact me; I’m a fanatic about checking my email).

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Ways of Religion is an introductory course in religious studies. It was set up to allow for a certain flexibility in approach. Because this course fulfills the Minority Studies requirement, approximately half of the classes will focus on the religions and cultures of racial and ethnic minorities. Additionally, because your instructor is an expert in the area of the new age and new religious movements, we will also study alternative religions. A recurring theme in both of these sets of religions is religious conflict and stereotyping. Approximately a half-dozen speakers from a variety of different religions will visit class to talk about their personal religious quests.

During the first few weeks of this course, I will discuss the notion that our view of the world (our so-called “world view”) is socially constructed rather than a self-evident perspective on reality. This notion will partially inform our study of different religions. The primary purpose of this first segment is (hopefully) to make our approach to the religions of others somewhat more open-minded than the approach we might normally take.

This is a survey course. The principal weakness of a survey course is that it necessarily oversimplifies the diversity within each religion. Every major religion contains enough diversity that it is possible to find almost any important idea somewhere in the history of each tradition. Despite these problems, one has to begin one's study somewhere, and, at the introductory level, one must inevitably rely upon oversimplifications.

My expectations for what I want you to get out of this class are comparatively modest. I am well aware that within six months after the end of the semester, you will have forgotten 90% of the information you memorized for quizzes and exams. Thus, while I *will* ask you to exercise your memory, the stress in this course will *not* be on memorizing information. Instead, my goal as an instructor is to expose you to a broad variety of ideas, experiences, and people — particularly to ideas and religions you might not ordinarily encounter in the course of your everyday life.

READINGS/EVALUATIONS

One of the purposes of a syllabus is to provide students with a kind of ‘contract’ by which they can determine what is expected of them and how they may obtain the grade they want. In order to understand the rationale behind my grading system for REL 102, one first needs to understand how I view this course.

The key to grasping my perspective is to realize that I see the core of REL 102 as in-class activities. Though I will lecture regularly, class time will often be used for videos (usually relatively short segments), presentations by guest lecturers, and Q&A discussions, both with your instructor and with guests. I view these classroom experiences as primary. If, in contrast, this was

a course emphasizing the acquisition of abstract information (like a math class, for example), then I would not likely attach as much importance to what happens in the classroom.

Because of the stress I place on in-class learning, good attendance is essential for a good grade. I will normally pass around an attendance sheet. Signing the attendance sheet for someone else who skips class will result in an automatic “F,” both for the signer and the “skip-er.”

For attendance purposes, the first half of class up to the break and the second half of the class after break count as two classes. With the exception of people who added the course late, more than two unexcused absences drops your final overall grade by a letter fraction. In other words, for three unexcused absences, the final grade of someone with a “B” would drop to a “B-”; for four absences, it would drop to a “C+”; for five absences to a “C”; etc. It is thus imperative that you avoid casually skipping class. I strongly suggest “saving your skips” for such “student emergencies” as needing extra time to prepare a last minute project for another class.

*Please note that showing up just to sign the attendance sheet and then leaving class (as a few students have done in the past) does **not** constitute attendance.* Also note that if you ever need to leave early, please let me know ahead of time. I am pretty easygoing about most things, but not about ducking out of class early. And finally, if you ever have to use the facilities, please just get up, leave, and return without asking permission (we’re in college, not grade school).

The readings will provide you with a background for what we do in class. I will try to provide you with a short study guide each week (I plan to post them on the D2L course site). Because of the way I have set up the quiz schedule, it will be very difficult to pass without doing the readings. So if you really do not like to read, then you should probably drop this course. My experience has been that most students do not do anything until they absolutely have to, and then only at the last possible minute. Because of this pattern, you will be required to take a short quiz (multiple choice format) on the reading assignment every week.

I will drop your lowest quiz grade. If you miss a quiz, that quiz will automatically be the one that gets dropped. Do not expect to be able to make up a quiz unless you were sick (I’m not going to insist on a doctor’s excuse unless you miss more than one class because of illness), an excuse indicating you are participating in some university activity, you make arrangements with me ahead of time, or some other reasonable explanation. The average of your quiz grades will constitute a full **Two-Thirds** of your final grade. The final exam will count One-Third. Quizzes will all be multiple choice format on D2L.

Additionally, I allow a certain amount of room (as much as 10% or more of the final grade) for what are sometimes called “subjective” factors. In other words, if over the course of a semester you make no particular impression on me, then your final grade will be derived entirely from the above factors. However, if I remember you as a particularly interested and/or conscientious student (someone who asked questions or who had something to discuss, either inside or outside of class), then you will probably find that your final grade will turn out higher than you anticipated. At the very least, you will probably receive the benefit of the doubt if you are only a few points away from the next higher grade. In recent years I have begun to keep track of people who contribute in class by asking them to drop me a quick email after class. This may sound odd, but it works quite well.

If, on the other hand, you make my job difficult in some way—especially continually talking with fellow students about something else when you should be paying attention in class—I will *lower* your final grade by as much as 10% (e.g., a “B” would drop to a “C”). This does *not*

mean that you will be penalized for turning to someone and making a few remarks. Rather, what I have in mind is someone who, day after day, carries on a conversation that distracts fellow classmates. This kind of conversation severely disrupts the in-class learning that I view as the core of REL 102.

FINAL EXAM

The final exam will be an essay exam. You will be asked to compose an essay on one of the following. Unless you read minds, you will not know which one ahead of time, so you will have to think about writing essays on all four topics. Each essay question deals with a theme or themes that cut across more than one of our weekly assignments. I am providing you with these questions ahead of time so that, as you do the readings and as we cover various topics in class, you can be thinking about how they will feed into your essay. **You should make a special effort to draw from all sources of information – readings, lectures, videos, and classroom discussions.**

The Social Construction of Reality. The first few weeks of the course we discussed conformity, socialization, ethnocentrism, world view, the “Natural Attitude,” etc - the many ways in which our sense of what is “real” has been shaped by our culture. Also, after demonstrating that our cultural conditioning shuts out certain kinds of experiences (the example I used in class was ‘feeling’ the electro-magnetic field between our hands), I discussed the notion that perhaps this world is a dream - in the specific sense that perhaps we can ‘wake up’ to another reality that will make this one appear dreamlike. Discuss these ideas - or some of the main ideas - in a coherent essay. Include a speculative discussion of how these processes make the world view of a non-traditional religion plausible.

Stereotyping, Racism, Prejudice. Almost all of the groups and traditions we studied this term have suffered from negative stereotypes. This is an issue that affects both controversial new religions and racial/ethnic minorities. The principal theorist I drew from in our discussion of stereotyping was Sigmund Freud. Though many people dismiss Freud’s ideas, his notion of projection remains a useful tool for understanding stereotyping and prejudice. Summarize the relevant aspects of Freud’s model (refer to our class on October 26), then discuss some of the specific examples of stereotyping and discrimination we examined over the course of the semester. Include concrete examples of “cult” stereotyping and of the racial/ethnic stereotyping discussed in your readings and in the classroom.

Genocide. Perhaps the most frightening consequence of negative stereotyping is genocide – the “deliberate and systematic destruction of a racial, political, or cultural group” (and, we should add, a religious group). Groups we examined this semester that have been targets of genocidal attacks are American Indians, Jews, the Branch Davidians, and Falun Gong. Draw on the discussion of projection and negative stereotyping (from October 26) as if you were answering the essay question on ‘Stereotyping, Racism, Prejudice,’ but then proceed to elaborate on this pattern’s worst potential (annihilating targeted groups). Include concrete examples from American Indians, Jews, the Branch Davidians, and Falun Gong.

Reincarnation, Karma, Suffering. South Asian traditions are ancient and complex. At the core of this complexity, however, is a reasonably straightforward understanding of the human condition: We are trapped in the cycle of death and rebirth, and need to seek release from this cycle. (An exception is the Hmong tradition; the goal in that tradition is not to break the cycle.) Write an essay explaining this core religious vision. Include a discussion of the idea of suffering in Buddhism, mentioning its role in the story of Buddha’s decision to leave home and seek enlightenment (drawn from the lecture on October 12). In addition to Buddhism and the Hmong tradition, include information from the lecture on Hinduism (September 28) and from the readings on – and our discussion with – Hare Krishna devotees (October 5).

Satanism and the Problem of Evil. One of the issues we discussed on November 9 was the problem of evil. State the problem. You might particularly want to explain how this problem in its classical form is more or less a direct result of how God was conceptualized in scholastic (medieval) philosophy. How has the problem of evil been used by critics of theism to attack the traditional notion of God? What are some of the ways in which theists have addressed the problem of evil? Also, in what ways are modern Satanists (in the LeVay tradition) “evil” and/or not evil? Is there even a ‘problem of evil’ for contemporary Satanists? To what extent do you feel that contemporary Satanists like Ben invert (reverse) the traditional meaning of “evil”? Alternately or additionally, to what extent do you feel a Satanist like Ben adheres to Christian values and just wears the label of “Satanist” because he enjoys shocking people? (In the later part of this question I’m not looking for specific answers; you can adopt any position you want as long as you support your position with reasoned arguments.)

TEXTBOOKS

Rental:	<i>Alternative Religions</i>
Purchase:	<i>Controversial New Religions</i> <i>The Autobiography of Malcolm X</i>
Other:	Selected readings from relevant Websites E-readings on D2L

Unless I make an explicit request to the contrary, you do not have to bring any of your textbooks to class.

COURSE CALENDAR

- 1. Introduction/the Social Construction of Reality** -Sept. 7
- 2. Autobiography of Malcolm X** - Sept. 14
- 3. Black Religion; the Nation of Islam** - Sept. 21
- 4. “Cults”; Hinduism** - Sept. 28
- 5. Hari Krishna Movement** - Oct. 5
- 6. Buddhism** - Oct. 12
- 7. Hmong Tradition in America** - Oct. 19
- 8. Stereotyping and Native American Traditions** - Oct. 26
- 9. Native American Traditions** - Nov. 2
- 10. Judaism; the Holocaust** - Nov. 9

- 11. The Waco Tragedy - Nov. 16**
- 12. Falun Gong - Nov. 30**
- 13. Satanism - Dec. 7**