

**BRANDEIS UNIVERSITY**  
REL107A World Religions  
Thursday, 5-8 PM

Spring 2007

**Instructor:** Dr. Helena Gourko (Ph.D. in philosophy, Ph.D. in religious studies)  
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Office Hours: Thursdays after class.

**Description:** REL107A offers intercultural analysis of world religions. The course intends to familiarize students with basic features of major religions in various cultures (with a special emphasis on Judaism, Western Christianity, Zoroastrianism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Shinto, Ch'an/Zen Buddhism, Islam, and Orthodox Christianity. What did Russian orthodoxy have to do with Russia turning to communism in 1917? Could traditional India have been transformed into a perfectly functioning cultural system for more than a millennium without the six classical Indian religions/*darsanas*? Why Japanese culture appears to be so amazingly tolerant to most different religions (Christianity, Buddhism, and Confucianism, among others) while keeping its traditional religiosity (Shinto). How has it been possible to assimilate Buddhism in utterly diverse cultures, both ancient and contemporary, and with different and even alternative interpretations of its doctrine? Why is contemporary Islam so ambiguous - and sometimes dangerous - in its cultural applications? What is the sudden revival of religions and everything religious in contemporary world that is supposed to be "post-everything" - religions included - about? What is religion in contemporary American culture? What is the future of religions? In other words, what is religion and what role does it play in cultures all over the world, both ancient and contemporary. These and other questions about religion and culture in their drift through time and space will be addressed in this course. In order to do this in a competent manner, basics of major types of religions (primitive, mythical, revealed, cult, etc.), and of religions most influential in world cultures, as well as highlights of history and cultural evolution of the east (primitive society, the Axial Age, traditional Hindu culture, China in times of Confucius and beyond, transitional Japanese society of 6<sup>th</sup> – 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, communist Russia, Islam in global cultures of nowadays, and others) will be studied.

**Format:** every topic is studied during one week of classes, with an informal lecture on the key issues presented by the instructor and video, field trip report and general discussion led by students, and exploration of supplementary topics; quizzes based on handouts will be conducted every third Thursday; handouts for every lecture will be available in advance; no handouts for supplementary topics, and no quizzes on them either.

**Grades** will be based on the following factors: periodic quizzes on the course materials (25%); class attendance (5%); participation in discussions (15%); leading discussions (10%); written project/field trip (25%); final exam (20%). Exemption from the final exam will be granted to three categories of students: 1) those with perfect attendance records (zero absences) and class participation; 2) those with A-/A averages at the end of the

semester and no more than two class absences; (3) those with B/B+ average and no more than one absence (qualified students will be notified by the instructor before finals). There will be no midterm exam.

**Attendance:** is very important for the final grade. A student who misses 20% (or more) of the classes without adequate evidence of medical or family emergency may be failed. Students are expected to be in class and on time on the day of a scheduled quiz. There will be no written make-up quizzes; if strongly desired oral make-up quizzes will be administered instead.

**Written Assignment:** write a 1,500 word (5 pages, double-space) episode for Hesse's *Siddhartha* consisting of two new dialogue partners for Siddhartha: one major Eastern Figure (e.g., Hindu, Jain, Confucian, Taoist, Ch'an Buddhist, Shintoist, Zen Buddhist, Zoroastrian, Orthodox Christian, or Muslim) and yourself.

**Field Trip (alternative assignment):** for those students who prefer to do something different than writing a paper; you can visit any establishment (church, mosque, etc.) of religions discussed in this course and do a presentation during a session devoted to this particular religion; a list of such establishments you can receive from the instructor.

**Discussions:** to be conducted every Thursday. All students are expected to familiarize themselves with readings and handouts, while two students will be asked to lead a class discussion. All students have to lead discussions; it is part of a final grade. A list of questions from every discussion leader neatly typed and signed has to be handed to the instructor.

### **Texts for Purchase -- Campus Book Store or Internet Suppliers**

**Required:** HERMANN HESSE. *SIDDHARTHA* (BANTAM) ISBN 0553208845

**Supplementary:** ELLWOOD AND MCGRAW. *MANY PEOPLES, MANY FAITHS: MEN AND WOMEN IN THE WORLD'S RELIGIONS* (PRENTICE-HALL) (E&M) ISBN 0130107352

### **Internet Sources**

[www.religion.rutgers.edu/links/vrindex/htm](http://www.religion.rutgers.edu/links/vrindex/htm)

# Course Schedule

## Week One

### **Introduction to the course. What is Religion? What is Culture?**

*Readings:* E&M, Chapter 1.

*Handouts:* “Definitions of Religion and Culture”, “Religion: One or Many?” “Religion and Science”.

*Videos:* “Seinfeld: The Bubble Boy”, “The Simpsons: Thank God It’s Not a Doomsday!”

*Supplementary Topic:* **Religious Pluralism**

## Week Two

### **Primitive Religions and Cultures.**

*Readings:* E&M, Chapter 2.

*Handout:* “Primitive Religions and Cultures”, “The Axial Age”

*Videos:* “Scientific Adam”, “Shamans”

*Supplementary Topic:* **Cults: Visitors from the Past?**

## Week Three

### **Religion and The Axial Age**

*Handout:* “The Axial Age”

*Videos:* “The History of God”, “Pulp Fiction”

*Supplementary Topic:* **What is a Source of Revelation: God? People?**

## Week Four

### **Hinduism and Jainism**

*Readings:* E&M, Chapter 3, pp. 57-98.

*Handout:* “Hinduism and Classical Hindu Culture”

*Videos:* “Hinduism”, “Jainism”

*Supplementary Topic:* **Ultimate Jainism of Mohandas Gandhi**

*Quiz on Primitive Religion and Religion in the Axial Age*

## Week Five

### **Buddhism as Response to Hinduism in India**

*Readings:* E&L, Chapter 4, pp. 127-153.

*Handout:* “Jainism and Buddhism in India”

*Video:* “Indian Buddhism”

*Supplementary Topic: Buddha as a Cultural Hero*

Week Six

**Taoism, Confucianism and Ch’an Buddhism in Chinese Culture**

*Readings:* E&M, Chapter 5, pp. 185-220.

*Handout:* “Taoism, Confucianism and Buddhism in Chinese Culture”

*Video:* “Chinese Religions”

*Supplementary Topics: Religion in Communist China, Buddhism in Tibet*

Week Seven

**Shinto and Zen Buddhism in Japanese Culture**

*Readings:* E&M, Chapter 5, pp. 234-244.

*Handout:* “Shinto and Buddhism in Japanese Culture”

*Video:* “Shinto”, “Zen Buddhism”, “The Simpsons: Moe’s Maggie Blues”

*Supplementary Topic: Maggie Simpson and Zen Buddhism*

*Quiz: Indian Buddhism, Chinese Religions*

Week Eight

**Culture and Religion of the Middle East: Zoroastrianism;**

**Nietzsche: *Thus Spoke Zarathustra***

*Readings:* E&M, Chapter 6.

*Handout:* “Zoroastrianism and Nietzsche”

*Videos:* “Zoroastrianism”, “2001: The Space Odyssey”, “The Simpsons: Bart’s Comet”

*Supplementary Topic: Bart Simpson and Friedrich Nietzsche*

Week Nine

**Judaism**

*Readings:* E&M, Chapter 7.

*Handout:* “Judaism”

*Video:* “Judaism”

*Supplementary Topic: The Temple*

Week Ten

## **Western Christianity**

*Readings:* E&M, Chapter 4, pp. 341-345.

*Handouts:* “Christianity”

*Video:* “Christianity”

*Supplementary Topic:* **Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism**

*Quiz on Zoroastrianism and Judaism*

## Week Eleven

### **Orthodox Christianity and Russian Culture**

*Readings:* E&M, Chapter 4, pp. 341-345.

*Handout:* “Russian Orthodoxy and Culture”

*Video:* “*Orthodox Christianity*”

*Supplementary Topic:* **Orthodox Christianity and Marxism in the USSR**

## Week Twelve

### **Islamic Religion and Culture**

*Video:* “The Hajj”

*Readings:* E&M, Chapter 9, pp. 387-422.

*Handouts:* “Islam as Religion and Civilization”, “Militant Islam”

*Supplementary Topic:* **Militant Islam**

## Week Thirteen

**Religion in America.** *Video:* “Religion in America”

*Readings:* E&M (170-172, 344-350, 417-418)

*Handouts:* “Religion in America”

*Video:* “Religion in America”

*Supplementary Topic:* **Evangelical Christianity**

## **Written Project Due**

## Week Fourteen

### **Future of Religion**

*Handout:* “Future of Religion”

*Video:* “Religion in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century”

*Supplementary Topic:* **Cyber-Religion**

## **Final Exam**