

CHRIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH COVINGTON – WEDNESDAYS, 6:00-7:30PM
COMPARATIVE WORLD RELIGIONS

“He who knows one religion, knows none.” -Max Müller

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Overview:

This course will survey the progression of spiritual thought in human history and study the major living religions of the world, their origins, beliefs, and cultural relationships. Each major tradition will be studied in roughly the chronological order that it developed in, starting with the spiritual nature and practices of prehistoric humans and ending with the modern state of multi-cultural relations with world religious groups. Classes will be directed at examining religious traditions within their own historical-cultural contexts to understand their beliefs through study and comparison, free from the limits of any particular cultural biases.

This is an interactive lecture and discussion format. Respectful discussion is encouraged, so feel free to share your own questions and insight.

Objective:

By the end of this course, you should have a broad understanding of the major religious beliefs, traditions, and customs of the world and how they interact with each other. You'll develop the fundamental ability to engage in constructive dialogue with other faith traditions by understanding their historical-cultural contexts, as well as hopefully use that experience to explore and understand your own beliefs more deeply and critically.

Rules:

There are only three basic rules specific to this class regarding our field of study:

1. Make distinctions, not judgements.

We are here to study theology, not pass judgement based on our own cultural context or belief system. Rather than say that this thing is “good” or that thing is “bad,” we are here to understand things within their own context.

2. There are not [m]any wrong answers.

Although there are *some* wrong answers in theology, there are not many. Most of the time, contradictions and disagreements are due to a lack of full context or cultural perspective. If in doubt, see rule #1, then see rule #3.

3. No “Salad Bar” Theology.

In theology/religious studies, we do not take what we want and leave the rest. Doing so has caused incalculable damage to human history over time. So, we always read everything in its full context and always take things as a whole, not in convenient parts.

Outline:

The schedule will follow this general framework, but will be flexible to allow for expanding some topics, condensing others, and extended discussion. One Section does not equal one class period. We will take our time as needed.

Section 1: The essential spiritual nature of humans and the evolution of abstract thought.

- Introduction and foundational terms.
- Human anthropology and development of abstraction.
- *Homo sapiens* vs. *homo spiritualis*

Section 2: Prehistoric/primitive religions.

- Animism.
- Totemism.
- Shamanism.

Section 3: South Asian religions (c. 3500 BC – present)

- Hinduism.
- Jainism.
- Sikhism.

Section 4: Judaism (c. 2000 BC – present)

- Early Israelites / Yahwism.
- Classical Judaism.
- Modern Judaism.

Section 5: Buddhism (c. 566 BC – present)

- Buddhist philosophy and the Four Noble Truths.
- Mahayana and Theravada.

Section 6: Christianity (1st century AD – present).

- Fundamental tenets of Christianity as a whole.
- Denominational divisions and offshoots.
- World relations.

Section 7: Islam (570 AD – present).

- Historical origins.
- Foundational beliefs and the Five Pillars
- Sunni Shia Split
- The many faces of the Muslim Experience
- Radical Islam and world relations
- ***India and the British Raj*** – 1858-1952 “putting it all together”
(Hindus/Sikhs/Muslims and the importance of cultural recognition)

Section 8: Modernity and Secularism.

- Modern atheism and its origins.
- Modern secularization and the culture of “none.”

Section 9: Multi-faith relations in a diverse world.

- Engaging with diverse cultures in a global community.