Comparative Religions

**Course code:** REL 140

**Semester and year:** Fall 2025

**Day and time:** Thursdays, 15:00 – 17:45

**Instructor:** Ted Turnau, Ph.D.

**Instructor contact:** [ted.turnau@aauni.edu](mailto:ted.turnau@aauni.edu), 774-3535-91

**Consultation hours:** Thursdays, 14:30 – 15:00 in room 4.02 (door off the stairs to the 4th floor).

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| **Credits US/ECTS** | 3/6 | **Level** | Introductory |
| **Length** | 15 weeks | **Pre-requisite** | TOEFL iBT 71 (for non-native English-speakers) |
| **Contact hours** | 42 hours | **Grading** | Letter grade |

# Course Description

# Our world is more religious than ever, and more religiously mixed than ever. In any given society, you will find people with religious beliefs and practices that differ from yours. Understanding these differing religious perspectives and practices is more important than ever before.

# Through class lecture and discussion, this course investigates what religion is and why it remains so potent a force in the world today. We will spend the majority of our time together exploring the major world religions (African Traditional Religions, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam), as well as postmodern religious relativism.

# Student Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this course, students should be able to:

* identify what religion is and why it remains relevant in today’s world,
* define various terms and core beliefs associated with the religions studied,
* understand how these terms integrate into a religious system,
* be able to compare, contrast and evaluate them,
* demonstrate an ability to see reality from a specific religious perspective.

# Reading Material

## Required Materials

* The library will supply students with one copy each of Irving Hexham’s *Understanding World Religions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), to be returned at the end of the semester. You will prepare for each unit by reading a chapter or two from this book. Readings drawn from other sources will be placed on the class website. Please complete the assigned reading before class so that you will be able to participate in discussions. These readings will orient you to what we shall be learning in class. There will also be in-class readings from the sacred texts of various world religions.

## Recommended Supplemental Materials (available on request from lecturer)

* Beckerlegge, Gwilym, ed. *The World Religions Reader,* 2d ed. New York: Routledge, 1998, 2001.
* Braswell, George. *Understanding World Religions,* rev. ed. Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 1994.
* Corduan, Winfried. *Neighboring Faiths: A Christian Introduction to World Religions.* Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998.
* Lewis, James F., and William G. Travis. *Religious Traditions of the World.* Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1991.
* Pelikan, Jaroslav, ed. *The World Treasury of Modern Religious Thought.* Boston, Toronto, London: Little, Brown and Co., 1990.
* Schmidt, Roger. *Exploring Religion,* 2d ed. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1988.
* Smart, Ninian, and Richard D. Hecht, eds. *Sacred Texts of the World: A Universal Anthology.* New York: Crossroad, 1982.
* Smith, Huston. *The Religions of Man.* New York: Harper and Row, 1958.
* Star, Jonathan, ed. *Two Suns Rising: A Collection of Sacred Writings.* New York: Bantam, 1991.
* **Eastern Religions**
* Basham, A. L. *The Origins and Development of Classical Hinduism.* Ed. and annotated by Kenneth G. Zysk. Boston: Beacon Press, 1989.
* Embree, Ainslie T., ed. *Sources of Indian Tradition,* vol. 1, *From the Beginning to 1800,* 2d ed. New York: Columbia University Press, 1988.
* Hay, Stephen, ed. *Sources of Indian Tradition,* vol. 2, *Modern India and Pakistan,* 2d ed. New York: Columbia University Press, 1988.
* Schumacher, Stephan, and Gert Woerner, eds. *The Encyclopedia of Eastern Philosophy and Religion: Buddhism, Taoism, Zen, Hinduism.* Boston: Shambhala, 1994.
* Suzuki, D. T. *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism.* New York: Grove Press, 1964.
* Yoshinori, Takeuchi, ed. *Buddhist Spirituality: Indian, Southeast Asian, Tibetan, Early Chinese.* New York: Crossroad, 1993.
* **Western Religions**
* Braswell, George W., Jr. *Islam: Its Prophet, Peoples, Politics and Power.* Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 1996.
* Heschel, Abraham Joshua. *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man.* New York: Noonday Press, 1951.
* John Paul, II. *Catechism of the Catholic Church,* 2d. ed. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994, 1997.
* Langer, Lawrence L. ed. *Art from the Ashes: A Holocaust Anthology.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.
* Lipset, Seymour Martin, and Earl Raab. *Jews and the New American Scene.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995.
* Mawdūdī, Abul A 'lā. *Human Rights in Islam.* Leicester, U.K.: The Islamic Foundation, 1994.
* Milne, Bruce. *Know the Truth: A Handbook of Christian Belief,* 2d. ed. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1982, 1998.
* Pickthall, Muhammad Marmaduke, translator. *The Meaning of the Glorious Qur'ān.* Tripoli: Islamic Call Society, 1930.
* Schirrmacher, Christine. *Islam and Politics: Sharia Law, Jihan, Women in Islam.* Bonn: Verlag für Kultur und Wissenschaft, 2008.
* Stott, John R. W. *Basic Christianity,* new rev. ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1958, 1971.
* Ware, Timothy. *The Orthodox Church,* new ed. New York: Penguin Books, 1963, 1997.

# Teaching methodology

**1. Lectures.** Some of these will be in-class, and some will be online (see “flipped classroom” below). You should take notes, as you will be responsible to know the contents of the lectures, whether in-class or online. (Outlines for note-taking will be provided and are posted on NEO).

**2. Discussion.** For some classes, I will employ a “flipped classroom” in which you will watch a unit lecture on Youtube, post a question (or questions) you have about it on our NEO class website, and we will use that as the basis of discussion. [NOTE: Do *not* watch these lectures on your mobile phones – you will miss information]. We will also discuss the answers you have to other homework assignments.

**3. Media.** I occasionally use film clips and songs to illustrate the ideas and textures of various religions.

**4. Summaries.** We will also summarize each religion into standard categories (the “Five Magnetic Points”) to distill the complexity into broad overviews once we complete a unit.

**5.** **Roleplaying.** Each of you will be assigned a religion to study independently over the course of the semester. In the last three classes, there will be a panel discussion in which practitioners of these religions (you students) will field questions from the audience (students who aren’t on the panel, plus me). You will need to “step into the shoes” of a believer of the religion which you’ve been assigned, to see the world through their eyes, and articulate that in answer to students’ questions. (See “Oral Project” below in section 7 – it’s not an oral presentation; it’s roleplay). The point is to build empathy and understanding for religious perspectives very different from yours.

# Course Schedule

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| **Session** | **Class Agenda** |
| **Session 1**  Sept. 4th | **Topic:** Introduction: Why and How to Study Religion, and What Is Religion, Anyway?  **Description:** An introduction to the class (syllabus, assignments, etc.), and an introduction to the topic of religion and how we will be approaching it.  **Reading:** Hexham chapters 1-2; Bavinck “Five Magnetic Points,” and “The Riddles of Religious Consciousness.” Watch the lecture “What is Religion” (link on NEO) and post at least one question or comment on NEO at least 24 hours before the next class.  **Assignments/deadlines:** see “reading” above. |
| **Session 2**  Sept. 11th | **Topic:** African Traditional Religion  **Description:** An overview of the thought and practice of ATR as well as a critical consideration of the terms “primal” or “primitive” religion.  **Reading:** Hexham, chapters 3-5 (optional: Hexham, ch. 6).  **Assignments/deadlines:** After completion of each unit, complete the grid and 5 magnetic points (due at the beginning of the next class and used as review). Watch “Vedic Hinduism” on Youtube, and post one question or comment on NEO 24 hours before the next class. |
| **Session 3**  Sept. 18th | **Topic:** The East: Hinduism 1 (Vedic and Vedantic)  **Description:** An overview of the gods, concepts and practices of two “schools” of Hinduism.  **Reading:** Hexham, chapters 7-8.  **Assignments/deadlines:** Grid and 5 magnetic points for Vedic and Vedantic Hinduism. |
| **Session 4**  Sept 25th | **Topic:** Hinduism 2 (Bhakti Hinduism)  **Description:** An overview of Bhakti Hinduism, including the three main schools of Bhakti: Vedic, Vedantic, and Shaktite.  **Reading:** Hexham, ch 9 (optional: Hexham, ch. 10).  **Assignments/deadlines:** Grid and 5 magnetic points for Bhakti Hinduism. Watch the lecture “The Teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism,” post at least one question or comment on NEO 24 hours before the next class. **MID-TERM EXAM pt. 1**: covers introduction (definition of religion), ATR, Hinduism (as far as we’ve covered). If you want to meet with me as a study group prior to the test, let me know. |
| **Session 5**  Oct. 2nd | **Topic:** Buddhism  **Description:** Introduction to the thought of Siddhatha Gautama, as well as Buddhism’s early development and an overview of Theravada.  **Reading:** Hexham, chapters 11-12 (optional: Hexham, ch. 13).  **Assignments/deadlines:** Grid and 5 magnetic points for Therevada and Mahayana. |
| **Session 6**  Oct. 9th | **Topic:** Buddhism continued/begin Chinese Traditional Religions  **Description:** Further explorations in Buddhism, including Mahayana, Zen, and Vajrayana (Tibetan) Buddhism. Then we shall begin an overview of basic concepts in Chinese religion (yin, yang, etc.), as well as Confucianism and Daoism.  **Reading:** No reading for today.  **Assignments/deadlines:** Grid and 5 magnetic points for Zen, and Vajrayana. Watch “Chinese Traditional Religions: Introductory Themes” on Youtube and post at least one question/comment on NEO 24 hours before next class. |
| **Session 7**  Oct. 16th | **Topic:** Finish Buddhism, Begin Chinese Traditional Religions.  **Description:** Review of types of Buddhism we have just finished, introduction to Chinese Traditional Religion, Confucianism.  **Reading:** No reading.  **Assignments/deadlines:** Any grids and 5 magnetic points we haven’t gotten to. |
| **Session 8**  Oct. 23rd | **Topic:** Finish Chinese Traditional Religions/Begin Judaism.  **Description:** Introduction to Judaism and its major concepts.  **Reading:** Reading for next class (Hexham 15-17, optional ch. 18).  **Assignments/deadlines:** Grid and 5 magnetic points for Confucianism. Watch “Introduction to Judaism” on Youtube and post at least one question/comment on NEO 24 hours before next class. |
| Oct. 30th | **Midterm break! Rest well!** |
| **Session 9**  Nov. 6th | **Topic:** Judaism cont.  **Description:** An overview of the major concepts, history, practices and varieties of Judaism.  **Reading:** Hexham, chapters 15-17 (optional: Hexham, ch. 18).  **Assignments/deadlines:** Grid and 5 magnetic points for Daoism. Watch “The Life and Teachings of Jesus” lecture on Youtube and post at least question/comment on NEO 24 hours before the next class.  **Midterm exam part 2:** covers Buddhism (all forms), Chinese Traditional Religions. If you want to meet with me as a group for a study session, let me know. |
| **Session 10**  Nov. 13th | **Topic:** Christianity 1  **Description:** An overview of major concepts drawn from the Christian Bible, as well as the life and ministry of Jesus.  **Reading:** Hexham, chapter 19.  **Assignments/deadlines:** Grid and 5 magnetic points as review for Judaism. |
| **Session 11**  Nov. 20th | **Topic:** Christianity 2  **Description:** An overview of the life and ministry of Paul, key concepts of Pauline theology, as well as branches of the Christian church.  **Reading:** Hexham, chapters 20-21(optional: Hexham, ch. 22).  **Assignments/deadlines:** Grid and 5 magnetic points for Christianity. Watch “The Life of Muhammad, Short History, and Teachings” lecture on Youtube, and post at least one question/comment on NEO at least 24 hours before the next class. |
| **Session 12**  Nov. 27th | **Topic:** Islam  **Description:** An overview of the life of Muhammad, the early history of Islam. Key concepts from the Qur’an, aspects of Muslim practice (5 Pillars, etc.), as well as the problem of militant Islam.  **Reading:** Hexham, chapter 23.  **Assignments/deadlines:** Panel discussion 1. |
| **Session 13**  Dec. 4th | **Topic:** Islam, continued.  **Description:** Key concepts from the Qur’an, aspects of Muslim practice (5 Pillars, etc.), as well as the problem of militant Islam (possibility of a guest lecture).  **Reading:** Hexham, chapters 24-25 (optional: Hexham, ch. 26, as well as Schirrmacher, “Defection from Islam,” and A ‘la Mawdudi, “Human Rights in Islam”).  **Assignments/deadlines:** Grid and 5 magnetic points for Islam. Panel discussion 2. **Midterm exam part 3:** Covers Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (as far as we’ve gotten). |
| **Session 14**  Dec. 11th | **Topic:** Postmodern Religious Relativism  **Description:** An exploration of religion in Western pluralistic democracies, and whether one must be relativistic in order to be tolerant.  **Reading:** None.  **Assignments/deadlines:** Panel discussion 3. |

# Course Requirements and Assessment (with estimated workloads)

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Assignment** | **Workload (average)** | **Weight in Final Grade** | **Evaluated Course Specific Learning Outcomes** | **Evaluated Institutional Learning Outcomes\*** |
| Class participation | 42 | 0% |  | 1,2,3. |
| Homework (reading, grid, 10 Diagnostic Points) | 38 | 15% | Student should be able to:   * define various terms and core beliefs associated with the religions studied, * understand how these terms integrate into a religious system, * be able to compare, contrast and evaluate them, * demonstrate an ability to see reality from a specific religious perspective. | 1, 2. |
| 3 Quizzes on terms (short essay) | 10 each | 15% each  (45% total) | Student should be able to:   * define various terms and core beliefs associated with the religions studied, * understand how these terms integrate into a religious system | 1, 2. |
| Oral Project (Panel Discussion) | 20 | 20% | Student should be able to:   * understand how terms integrate into a religious system, * demonstrate an ability to see reality from a specific religious perspective. | 1,2,3 |
| Written Project  (In-class writing assignment) | 20 | 20% | Student should be able to:   * define various terms and core beliefs associated with the religions studied, * understand how these terms integrate into a religious system, * be able to compare, contrast and evaluate them, demonstrate an ability to see reality from a specific religious perspective. | 1, 2. |
| Extra-credit paper | 3 | 2% | Personal reflection regarding the material learned. | 1,2. |
| **TOTAL** | **150** | **100%** |  |  |

\*1 = Critical Thinking; 2 = Effective Communication; 3 = Effective and Responsible Action

# Detailed description of the assignments

## Attendance/class participation: Be in class, ask questions (either in class or on NEO forums), ask questions at panel discussions.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Assessed area** | **Percentage** |
| Being in class and participating. | 100% |
| Being present, active, and curious in this class is crucial for understanding the concepts. I know some students are introverted and find asking questions in person intimidating. Students are welcome to ask questions through NEO forum—there will be one for each class. I will answer your questions, and might bring it up in class if you raise a significant point. |  |
| If you miss a class, I will expect you to borrow notes from a classmate and give me a summary on NEO forums. Failure to do so by the next class will count against this part of your grade. |  |

## Homework: Complete readings, and on completion of a unit, fill out the Grid and 5 Magnetic Points sheet. The Grid is a way of capturing a religion in “snapshot” form by briefly listing its essential characteristics, its typical functions, and its symbolic forms. The 5 Magnetic points summarizes each religion as a worldview using 5 aspects of each religion.

**Assessment breakdown**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Assessed area** | **Percentage** |
| Reading | Each of these |
| Complete the Grid | is assessed on |
| Complete the 5 Magnetic Points | completion only, |
|  | not correctness.  Complete = 100%. Incomplete = 0% (or some fraction of 100%). |

## Three Quizzes on Terms: Each unit outline will contain at the back a list of terms which students will be responsible to know (if you do not find a terms list, please contact me immediately). Three times in the semester there will be a quiz at the beginning of class lasting 25 minutes. You will be graded on clarity and fullness, how well you can demonstrate knowledge about the term/question asked. I try to make myself available for review sessions, but these must be initiated by a student study-group. In other words, it is up to you students to contact me and find out when I’m available.

## Oral Project (see document – “Panel Discussion Expectations and Rubric” on NEO): You will be assigned a religion which you are to study throughout the semester. Toward the end of the semester, you will represent that religion in a panel discussion. Note: this is NOT an oral presentation. Rather, you are to be a believer from that religion, ready to answer any and every question posed to you by students in the audience…or me.

**Assessment breakdown**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Assessed area** | **Percentage** |
| Preparation/argumentative cogency | 30% |
| Imaginative empathy | 30% |
| Presentation/response/thinking on feet | 30% |
| Sources | 10% |

## Written Project: In this in-class writing assignment you are to:

## a) describe two religions (one must be the religion you were assigned for the oral project),

## b) compare and contrast the two religions, noting similarities and differences, and

## c) evaluate them and answer which you think is “better” (tell me how you choose to define “better”), and why. You will need to choose, however you frame your choice (in other words, saying “Well, they’re both equally good in their own ways” will not suffice).

## It is important that you not simply choose and state an opinion, but that you back it up with argumentation.

You will be allowed to bring with you one 3-inch by 5-inch card (or smaller, such as an A7 card) with as many written notes as you can fit (and they must be *written*). You will have one hour to complete the assignment, so use your time well (about 20 minutes per section).

**Assessment breakdown**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Assessed area** | **Percentage** |
| Summaries of both religions | 33.3% |
| Insight of compare/contrast section | 33.3% |
| Cogency and persuasiveness of evaluation section | 33.3% |

# General Requirements and School Policies

## General requirements

All coursework is governed by AAU’s academic rules. Students are expected to be familiar with the academic rules available in the Codex and Student Handbook and to maintain the highest standards of honesty and academic integrity in their work. Please see the AAU intranet for a [summary of key policies](https://drive.google.com/drive/u/1/folders/1xoNETY9yqNMwNP-06wDzM2VmgMIOire-) regarding coursework.

***Course Specific Requirements***

* Attendance policy for Turnau’s courses: The lectures and class discussions will be the primary means of learning in this class. Therefore, it is very important that you actually come to as many classes as you can (coming to them all would be ideal). Here's my attendance policy: You may miss one class. If you miss a second, then I will require you to post on NEO three comments and/or questions that show you watched and engaged with the lecture recording (if available) or notes taken by a classmate. The same for the second or third. If you do it within 48 hours, I may even mark you present! Do NOT miss four classes—I reserve the right to fail any student who misses four classes. Note: Coming more than 15 minutes late to class will count as one-half of an absence. If you are more than 30 minutes late, I will mark you as absent. Missing classes may adversely affect your grade, so please come to class, and come on time.
* If for some life-or-health-threatening reason you know that you will miss a quiz or a presentation, you MUST inform me at least 24-hours in advance to arrange for an alternate time to take the quiz or give the presentation. If you do not give me advance notice, I may deduct points for lateness.
* Students may NOT use AI text generating websites or apps for their papers or homework assignments. Letting an AI bot do your writing for you is a form of plagiarism. Using such aids will result in a failing grade for that assignment, and perhaps referral to the Dean.
* If unsure about technical aspects of writing, students are encouraged to consult with the tutors of the AAU Academic Tutoring Center. For more information and/or to book a tutor, please contact the ATC at: <http://atc.simplybook.me/sheduler/manage/event/1/>. You can also talk to me. I truly want to help you avoid plagiarism.
* Electronic devices are to be off and put away during class (except at break).
* Course accessibility and inclusion: If you have learning accommodations, please speak to me as soon as possible. I will do what I can to help (within reason).

# Grading Scale

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Letter Grade** | **Percentage\*** | **Description** |
| A | 95 – 100 | **Excellent performance**. The student has shown originality and displayed an exceptional grasp of the material and a deep analytical understanding of the subject. |
| A– | 90 – 94 |
| B+ | 87 – 89 | **Good performance**. The student has mastered the material, understands the subject well and has shown some originality of thought and/or considerable effort. |
| B | 83 – 86 |
| B– | 80 – 82 |
| C+ | 77 – 79 | **Fair performance**. The student has acquired an acceptable understanding of the material and essential subject matter of the course, but has not succeeded in translating this understanding into consistently creative or original work. |
| C | 73 – 76 |
| C– | 70 – 72 |
| D+ | 65 – 69 | **Poor**. The student has shown some understanding of the material and subject matter covered during the course. The student’s work, however, has not shown enough effort or understanding to allow for a passing grade in School Required Courses. It does qualify as a passing mark for the General College Courses and Electives. |
| D | 60 – 64 |
| F | 0 – 59 | **Fail**. The student has not succeeded in mastering the subject matter covered in the course. |

\* Decimals should be rounded to the nearest whole number.