

INTRODUCTION TO RELIGION

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Course Objectives:

This course introduces students to five of the world's major religious traditions -- Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam -- in addition to selected ongoing debates in the study of religion. Readings include foundational texts from each tradition, works by 20th and 21st century adherents and theoretical texts in the study of religion. We will consider the following questions: When and how have these traditions interacted? What are the ways of life espoused by these traditions? What are their diverse views of human nature? What are their views of this life and world? What are their views of the ultimate destiny of the individual and humankind? In addition, we will also examine the possibility of a common core within religious traditions, the debate around insider/outsider status in the study of religion and the origins and adequacy of the term "religion" itself.

Texts to Purchase:

Bhagavad Gita

Buddhist Scriptures (Penguin Classics edition, edited by Edward Conze)

Thich Nhat Hanh, *Being Peace*

Elie Wiesel, *Night*

Leila Ahmed, *A Border Passage*

(Everything else is on electronic reserve on the Blackboard site under "Course Reserves" or readily available online)

Grades

short essays: 50% of your grade (See the appendix on how to develop a good thesis statement)

quizzes: 10% of your grade

discussion threads for participation: 40% of your grade

A note about discussion and participation: These class discussions are important for developing a social learning community and a successful online course. They also reflect your class participation, so you are required to participate in the discussion thread. Student discussions (on the Class Blackboard) are moderated by the instructor. However, the primary purpose is for students to initiate questions and carry on discussions with each other. Your active participation not only demonstrates an understanding and appreciation of the subject matter (or lack thereof), it also contributes immensely to the overall learning experience (for all students) in this course. Consequently, all students are expected to participate in a helpful and constructive manner in each unit's discussion thread(s). In addition to their own posts students **must respond to at least one of their fellow students' posts in each module**. All postings are expected to be professional in tone, clear, competently produced and delivered; and their content should reflect an understanding of at least the lectures and assigned readings. All original discussion posts are due by **8pm** on the due date indicated on the syllabus. Please respond to threads **within 24 hours**. I **will not** accept late submissions for the Discussion Board assignments.

University of Miami Honor Code

You are required to follow the University of Miami Honor Code, established for students to protect the academic integrity of the University of Miami. Please review the [Undergraduate Honor Code](#).

(http://umcontent.com/UM_HighEd_2008/AFS101/undergrad_honorcode.pdf)

Contact your instructor if you have any questions or concerns.

Course Outline and Assignments

Unit 1: Introduction: January 15

Unit 1 Reading Assignments

Unit 1 Reading and Discussion Assignment

Unit 1 Computer Scored Assignment

Unit 2: Hinduism: Due January 22

Unit 2: Reading Assignment

Unit 2: Writing Assignment

Unit 3: Hinduism and Gandhi Due January 29

Unit 3 Reading Assignment

Unit 3 Film Assignment: Watch the film Gandhi. This film is widely available.

(<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0083987/>)

Unit 3 Computer Scored Assignment

Unit 4: Buddhism, Part 1: Due February 5

Unit 4 Reading Assignment

Unit 4: Reading and Writing Assignment

Unit 5: Buddhism, Part 2: Due in two parts, February 12 and 19

Unit 5: Reading Assignment

Unit 5: Reading and Essay Assignment due February 12

Unit 5: Discussion Assignments due February 19

Unit 4 and 5 Computer-Scored Assignment due February 19

Unit 6: Judaism, Part 1: Due February 26

Unit 6: Reading Assignment

Unit 6: Reading and Discussion Assignment

Unit 7: Judaism, Part 2: Due March 4

Unit 7: Reading Assignment

Unit 7: Discussion Assignment

Unit 8: Christianity, Part 1: Due in two parts March 11 and 18

Unit 8: Reading Assignment

Unit 8: Video and Discussion Assignment due March 11

Unit 8: Reading and Writing Assignment due March 18

Unit 9: Christianity, Part 2: Due March 25

Unit 9: Reading Assignment

Unit 9: Video and Discussion Assignment

Unit 8 and 9 Computer Scored Assignment

Unit 10: Islam, Part 1: Due April 1

Unit 10: Reading Assignment

Unit 10: Reading and Discussion Assignment

Unit 11: Islam, Part 2: Due in two parts April 8 and 15

Unit 11: Reading

Unit 11: Reading and Writing Assignment due April 8

Unit 11: Video and Discussion Assignment due April 15

Unit 11 Computer Scored Assignment due April 15

Unit 12: Religion and Politics in Recent Times: Due in two parts April 22 and 29

Unit 12: Reading

Unit 12: Reading and Discussion Assignment due April 22

Unit 12: Video and Essay Assignment due April 29

Appendix

How to Write a Thesis Statement

What is a Thesis Statement?

Almost all of us--even if we don't do it consciously--look early in an essay for a one- or two-sentence condensation of the argument or analysis that is to follow. We refer to that condensation as a thesis statement.

Why Should Your Essay Contain A Thesis Statement?

- to test your ideas by distilling them into a sentence or two
- to better organize and develop your argument
- to provide your reader with a "guide" to your argument

In general, your thesis statement will accomplish these goals if you think of the thesis as the answer to the question your paper explores.

How to Generate a Thesis Statement if the Topic is Assigned.

Almost all assignments, no matter how complicated, can be reduced to a single question. Your first step, then, is to distill the assignment into a specific question. For example, if your assignment is "Write a report to the local school board explaining the potential benefits of using computers in a fourth-grade class," turn the request into a question like "What are the potential benefits of using computers in a fourth-grade class?" After you've chosen the question your essay will answer, compose one or two complete sentences answering that question.

Q: "What are the potential benefits of using computers in a fourth-grade class?"

A: "The potential benefits of using computers in a fourth-grade class are"

OR

A: "Using computers in a fourth-grade class promises to improve"

The answer to the question is the thesis statement for the essay.

How to Generate a Thesis Statement if the Topic is Not Assigned.

Even if your assignment doesn't ask a specific question, your thesis statement still needs to answer a question about the issue you'd like to explore. In this situation, your job is to figure out what question you'd like to write about.

A good thesis statement will usually include the following four attributes:

- take on a subject upon which reasonable people could disagree

- deal with a subject that can be adequately treated given the nature of the assignment
- express one main idea
- assert your conclusions about a subject

Let's see how to generate a thesis statement for a social policy paper.

Brainstorm the topic.

Let's say that your class focuses upon the problems posed by drug addiction. You find that you are interested in the problems of crack babies, babies born to mothers addicted to crack cocaine.

You start out with a thesis statement like this:

Crack babies.

This fragment isn't a thesis statement. Instead, it simply indicates a general subject. Furthermore, your reader doesn't know what you want to say about crack kids.

Narrow the topic

Your readings about the topic, however, have led you to the conclusion that not only do these babies have a difficult time surviving premature births and withdrawal symptoms, but their lives will be even harder as they grow up because they are likely to be raised in an environment of poverty and neglect. You think that there should be programs to help these children.

You change your thesis to look like this:

Programs for crack kids.

This fragment not only announces your subject, but it focuses on one main idea: programs. Furthermore, it raises a subject upon which reasonable people could disagree, because while most people might agree that something needs to be done for these children, not everyone would agree on what should be done or who should do it. You should note that this fragment is not a thesis statement because your reader doesn't know your conclusions on the topic.

Take a position on the topic.

After reflecting on the topic a little while longer, you decide that what you really want to say about this topic is that in addition to programs for crack babies, the government should develop programs to help crack children cope and compete.

You revise your thesis to look like this:

More attention should be paid to the environment crack kids grow up in.

This statement asserts your position, but the terms more attention and the environment are vague.

Use specific language.

You decide to explain what you mean about "the environment," so you write:

Experts estimate that half of crack babies will grow up in home environments lacking rich cognitive and emotional stimulation.

This statement is specific, but it isn't a thesis. It merely reports a statistic instead of making an assertion.

Make an assertion based on clearly stated support.

You finally revise your thesis statement one more time to look like this:

Because half of all crack babies are likely to grow up in homes lacking good cognitive and emotional stimulation, the federal government should finance programs to supplement parental care for crack kids.

Notice how the thesis answers the question, "Why should anything be done for crack kids, and who should do it?" When you started thinking about the paper, you may not have had a specific question in mind, but as you became more involved in the topic, your ideas became more specific. Your thesis changed to reflect your new insights.

How to Tell a Strong Thesis Sentence from a Weak One.

1. A strong thesis takes some sort of stand.

Remember that your thesis needs to show your conclusions about a subject. For example, if you are writing a paper for a class on fitness, you might be asked to choose a popular weight-loss product to evaluate. Here are two thesis statements:

There are some negative and positive aspects to the Banana Herb Tea Supplement.

This is a weak thesis. First, it fails to take a stand. Second, the phrase "negative and positive" aspects" are vague.

Because Banana Herb Tea Supplement promotes rapid weight loss that results in the loss of muscle and lean body mass, it poses a potential danger to customers.

This is a strong thesis because it takes a stand.

2. A strong thesis justifies discussion.

Your thesis should indicate the point of the discussion. If your assignment is to write a paper on kinship systems, using your own family as an example, you might come up with either of these two thesis statements:

My family is an extended family.

This is a **weak thesis because it states an observation**. Your reader won't be able to tell the point of the statement, and will probably stop reading.

While most American families would view consanguineal marriage as a threat to the nuclear family structure, many Iranian families, like my own, believe that these marriages help reinforce kinship ties in an extended family.

This is a strong thesis because it shows how your experience contradicts a widely-accepted view. A good strategy for creating a strong thesis is to show that the topic is controversial. Readers will be interested in reading the rest of the essay to see how you support your point.

3. A strong thesis expresses one main idea.

Readers need to be able to see that your paper has one main point. If your thesis expresses more than one idea, then you might confuse your readers about the subject of your paper. For example:

Companies need to exploit the marketing potential of the Internet, and web pages can provide both advertising and customer support.

This is a weak thesis statement because the reader can't decide whether the paper is about marketing on the Internet or web pages. To revise the thesis, the relationship between the two ideas needs to become more clear. One way to revise the thesis would be to write:

Because the Internet is filled with tremendous marketing potential, companies should exploit this potential by using web pages that offer both advertising and customer support.

This is a strong thesis because it shows that the two ideas are related. Hint: a great many clear and engaging thesis statements contain words like "because," "since," "so," "although," "unless," and "however."

4. A strong thesis statement is specific.

A thesis statement should show exactly what your paper will be about, and will help you keep your paper to a manageable topic. For example, if you write a paper on hunger, you might say:

World hunger has many causes and effects.

This is a weak thesis statement for two major reasons. First, "world hunger" can't be discussed thoroughly in five or ten pages. Second, "many causes and effects" is vague. You should be able to identify specific causes and effects. A revised thesis might look like this:

Hunger persists in Appalachia because jobs are scarce and farming in the infertile soil is rarely profitable.

This is a strong thesis because it narrows the subject to a more specific and manageable topic and it also identifies the specific causes for the existence of hunger.